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Bronco Billy, the Saddle Prince.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



SNORTING WITH PAIN AND RAGE, THE VICIOUS STALLION GAVE ONE GRIPE AT THE DARING BOY'S LEGS.

Bronco Billy,

THE SADDLE PRINCE.

Thrilling Scenes in the Life of
William Powell,* the Young
Border Hero.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL," "WILD BILL,"
"TEXAS JACK," "BUCKSKIN SAM," "OLD
GRIZZLY ADAMS'S BOY PARD,"
"WHITE BEAVER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BLUE-EYED BILLY.

"PARDS, I are the great American horse-catcher, mustang-rider and Bronco-Breaker o' ther Texas wilds, and I wears ther champ'-yon badge on my somb'ro, as yer all kin see.

"I has heur a lot o' angil ponies fer ter sell, an' ther price are 'way down, an' they goes cheap, so who says buy?"

The speaker was an out-and-out Texan herder of mustangs, and he rode into an encampment one Sunday afternoon, where a wagon-train westward bound, had halted for a rest of a day, not so much to keep the Sabbath holy, as to make it a time for repairs to the vehicles and harness, and to give the tired animals a chance to recuperate.

There were in the train half a dozen wagons, drawn by four mules each, a couple of ambulances, some twenty human beings, and two-score head of cattle.

The herder had ridden up to the camp mounted upon a snow-white stallion of wondrous beauty of body and limb, and with a mane that fell to his knees almost, and a tail that dragged along over the prairie grass.

The animal had on his back a Mexican saddle of great value, for it was covered with Mexican pesos, had housings of panther and wild-cat skins, stirrups that were inlaid with silver, and the broad horn was rimmed with solid gold.

The bridle was of silver links, and the huge Mexican bit was of the same precious metal, and the whole paraphernalia was worthy of a king.

The rider was a man of herculean build, with great broad shoulders, and a face that was tanned to the hue of leather, and was reckless and cruel.

He was dressed in buckskin, even to mocasins, and wore a sombrero that was encircled by a gold cord, made to resemble a

lasso, and the brim was bent up in front, and held there by a massive gold pin, a miniature mustang, lassoed out by a small chain of gold at the end of which was a stake-pin, stuck in the hat, giving the idea that the animal was lariatied out upon the prairie.

The eyes of the gold mustang were large diamonds, and the red nostrils were rubies, making the trinket one of great value and beauty.

Behind this strange horseman, with his elegant trappings, came his herd of ponies, some of them saddled and bridled for use, and all of them thoroughly trained.

As he drew up at the camp, his herd halted near, and the guide of the train called out:

"Come, pards, here's ther Bronco-Breaker, an' yer kin git a animile ter suit yer, ef yer hain't already suited."

The train people quickly gathered around, and were greeted by Rio Grande Rob, the Bronco-Breaker, with the words that open this story.

"Come, youngster, you look like a boy as has grit, an' you oughter freeze ter a mustang as has ther same mater'al ter carry yer, an' thet roan thar with the Texas saddle are ther animile," continued the Bronco Breaker, addressing a youth who had come forward with the others, and by whose side stood a dark-faced, handsome woman, with the air of a queen.

The youth was not more than fifteen, small, wiry in his build, and his movements were quick and nervous.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings and hunting-shirt, the former being stuck in top-boots, in the leg of which, on the outer side, were holsters, one containing a knife, the other a revolver.

He wore spurs that had the look of being gold, and in his belt were a pair of revolvers and a bowie, with an ivory handle, that had been exquisitely carved to represent an Indian chief in all his feather and buckskin garb.

The boy's face was almost girlish, except for its look of recklessness and resolution, for his complexion was clear, though dark, his teeth white and even, and his eyes large, sky-blue, fringed with the longest lashes, and in strange contrast with his hair, which was as black as ink, and hung in curls far down his back.

The woman by his side was evidently his mother, and in spite of being in homespun, and with a camp of emigrants, there was about her an air of refinement and stately dignity that was very imposing.

Like her son, she wore a broad-brimmed sombrero, and in a belt around her waist was a gold-mounted revolver.

*Also known as "Blue-Eyed Billy," and the younger brother of "White Beaver" and "Night-Hawk George."—THE AUTHOR.

The remainder of the train were a rather rough lot, with the exception of a gray-haired man and his daughter, a maiden of seventeen.

"I do want a good mustang, so will buy one from you if I can get one to suit me," said the youth, quietly.

"Ter suit yer? Why, I kin suit ther King o' Sheba with a critter.

"Look at that roan thar!"

"I do not like him," said the youth, quietly.

"Yer don't like him?" asked the mustanger in surprise.

"No."

"Waal, you is hard ter please.

"What mout be your name, young'un?"

"It mout be Smith, but it isn't," answered the youth, flushing slightly, as he imitated the manner of speaking of the Texan.

"Yer hain't ashamed of it?"

"No."

"Waal, spit it out, fer I likes yer style, an' guess you'll suit Texas."

"My name is Billy Powell."

"Yes, an' we in ther camp calls him Blue-Eyed Billy," chimed in the guide.

"Yer is well named, youngster, fer yer eyes is blue, an' thet pretty ter suit a gal, which maybe yer is, fer petticoats hain't no more sign o' a gal in Texas than is pants a dead sure sartinty o' a man.

"But what hes yer ag'in' thet horse?"

"His body is too short and his legs too long."

"Whew! Guess you is posted on horse-flesh, fer yer says right, though I never noticed that fact afore. Now thar is thet bay mare?"

"No."

"Don't freeze ter her?"

"No."

"Waal, thet spotted pony?"

"Too small."

"Ther clay-bank then?"

"He is too dull-looking."

"Fact!—he's got a sleepy look, but wake him up an' he be thar."

"I don't wish to have to wake him up every time I need him."

"That are gospel. But look at that gray?"

"He is too old."

"Shout out his age for stamps."

The youth stepped up to the horse, critically examined his mouth, and said:

"Twelve years old."

"To a minute! What were the size o' our bet?"

"Never mind that; but sell me a horse to suit me."

"About how high wu'd yer go?"

"Suit me with a horse and name your price," was the indifferent reply

"Ah! Yer has got ther metal then ter pay?"

"My son can pay you your price, sir, for any horse he takes a fancy to," said Mrs. Powell, calmly; and the guide added:

"Fact, pard, fer they has ther dust, an' don't you forgit it."

"Then I hes got a crittur ter sell 'em, an' don't yer forgit it," answered the Bronco-Breaker, as he dismounted from his beautiful snow-white horse, apparently determined to strike a bargain right there.

CHAPTER II.

RIO GRANDE BOB, THE BRONCO-BREAKER.

"WAAL now, sonny—"

"My name is Billy Powell," corrected the youth, apparently not taking the familiar manner of the herder.

"I stands upsot, Mr. Powell. I hes dismounted ter sell yer a horse, for I hes good ones."

"They are a good lot, but I don't see among the loose ones just my choice," responded Blue-Eyed Billy.

"Does yer see ther one ter suit yer at all?"

"I do."

"It may be ther black stallion?"

"That is a very fine animal, but I like the white stallion better."

"Hain't got no white stallion," and the Texan cast his eyes over the herd.

"Why you have, for you just dismounted from his back."

"Satan's ghost! does yer mean *my* horse?" almost yelled the Texan.

"Are they not all your horses?" was the cool reply.

"They is, for I cotched 'em on ther par-rarer as wild as skeart rabbits, an' trained 'em; but let me tell yer now thet thet white horse I straddled hain't for sale."

"Then I do not care to purchase any," and Blue-Eyed Billy turned away.

"Hold on, young feller!"

The youth turned and once more faced the Texan.

"Does yer know what yer wants to purchas?"

"Yes; that beautiful white, with the elegant saddle and bridle."

"May Heaven forgive yer cheek, for I kin not!"

"I do not understand you, sir!" said the youth, evidently nettled.

"Pard, does you know me?" and the man turned to the guide of the train.

"I does."

"Who is I?"

"Rio Grande Bob, ther Bronco-Breaker," was the reply.

"Fact! now what kin I do?"

"Out-lasso, out-ride, an' they do say out-kill any man in Texas."

"Fact, sure! now what are thet horse?"

"The one you rides?"

"Yas."

"I doesn't know his name."

"It are a name a leddy gi'n me at the fort, an' I hes ter twist it round my mouth afore I kin git the hang o' it, but as she say it did mean the Devil, I jist lets the horse hev it."

"She calt it *Mephisto*."

"And that is the name of your horse?" asked Mrs. Powell.

"It are, m'am; but I wants the guide ter tell yer 'bout thet horse, fer he are know'd in Texas, sure."

"Yas, I hes heard," said the guide, "thet you did lay out on thet perarer fer one year ter catch the animile."

"I did, an' he were wuth it."

"Yer see thet animile led the drove, some two thousand or more, an' men laid fer him with lariat an' trap ter cotch him, but it wa'n't no use, fer he jist c'u'd out run the fastest horse they ever hed at his heels."

"So I makes a bet o' a thousan' pesos ter take him in, an' hevin' planked the dust I pranced out fer the pararer."

"I got my first sight o' him in a piece o' timber, an' I seen he were young, not more'n four year old, an' not in his prime."

"But it wa'n't no use ter lay fer him, an' I found a year glidin' away without havin' him in my grip."

"I cotched many others, but thet fleetest of 'em were slow when I put 'em after thet white."

"But I diskivered thet they hed one place they feeded about once a month, fer the grass growed out good thar in thet time, an' thar is whar I camped out."

"I tuk a tree fer it, an' I laid my plans accordin' tu my idees, an' then I waited thet comin' o' the drove."

"I lived in thet tree one week entire afore they comed, an' then I see 'em, an' I got me ready fer the fun."

"I seen thet ther' were two droves tergether then, one led by my horse, an' t'other by a stallion jist adzactly like him, only he were blacker nor any nigger I ever seen in a cotton-field."

"Says I ter myself:

"'Rob, arry one will do.'

"Waal, they comed into thet timber an' as good luck would hev it, the white made fer my trees."

"Now I hed jist rigged up thet sweetest lectle net yer ever seen."

"It lay on the ground fer about thirty foot squar', an' were made o' lariats, over which I hed spread leaves ter hide 'em."

"By pullin' on a lariat hung in a tree above me, I jist c'u'd raise the four corners o' thet net an' thar I w'u'd hev my horse, pervidin' he went over the ropes, an' I hed seen thet jist under my tree were his fav'rite place each time the herd hed comed thar."

"Waal, I prayed my prayer, an' thar come the white straight fer my trap."

"I were ready, an' as ther' were some half-dozen close around him I jist gits my revolver ready fer use, fer I hed detarmined on what I w'u'd do."

"In he comes, an' the t'others with him, an' then I draws on my lariat."

"Up went the four corners, and then I made my end fast, an' thar was five horses in that net."

"Lordy hev marcy, but they was astonished! But I detarmined thet t'others sh'u'dn't hurt my white, an' I jest sent four bullets inter the brain o' the rest of 'em, and thet left the boss animile alone."

"Did he kick?"

"Waal, he did, some, an' he jest nigh shook me outer the tree; but the more he kicked the more he got tied up, an' soon he had ter simmer down calm; an' the drove hevin' skipt when I shot, I slid down the tree an' looked at my beauty."

"Pards, I hed him, an' yet it tuk me a week afore I c'u'd straddle him, an' it were a month afore I had the enjoyment o' takin' him inter the settlement."

"I got my bet money, an' I were offered much more fer thet animile; but I refused, an' now I hes him trained so thet nobody kin ride him but me, an' this heur pretty boy with the gal eyes axes me ter sell him my horse."

"And I repeat it. I wish to buy him," said Billy.

"What will you give for him?" asked the Texan, with a sly look.

"What do you ask?"

"Maybe a thousand dollars would be too high for you?"

The youth turned to his mother and said something in a tongue which none present understood, and she replied in the same language.

"No; I will give you a thousand dollars for the horse, saddle and bridle as he now stands," was the reply.

"What would you do with him?"

"Ride him, of course."

"But you can't do it?"

"Why?"

"He won't let you."

"I'll bet you the thousand against the horse, saddle and bridle that I can," was the confident reply of Billy.

The Texan laughed, and said:

"Boy, yer looks grit, fer I hes on my soul

ther lives o' a dozen folks as that horse hev kilt from tryin' ter ride him, not ter speak o' broken legs an' arms."

"I will make the bet," said Billy.

"But yer mammy won't see yer kilt," and the Texan glanced at the mother of Billy, who answered quietly:

"If my son wishes to make the bet with you, sir, I am willing that he should do so."

"Waal, waal, he are too pretty ter be kilt an' trampled on, fer that are jist what Mephisto does do with them as 'tempts ter ride him."

"You are afraid to risk your horse, then?"

"Look a-here, young feller, I isn't afeerd o' anything on airth," was the angry reply.

"Then why don't you make the bet?"

"I doesn't want ter see yer kilt."

"You are too tender-hearted for a man with your ugly face," was Billy's cutting reply, and it served the purpose the youth meant it should, for he answered quickly:

"If yer has got ther dust jist count it out, an' yer kin jist sail ter ther front an' git kilt, fer yer'll be cold meat within ther half-hour."

"All right. Just tie your horse to that tree and take the saddle off."

"Ah! you rides bare-back, you does?" sneered the Texan.

"Yes."

"Waal, I'll lariat ther horse out on ther perarer thar, an' he are at yer sarvice."

"When yer gits tired ridin' him, leave him thar," said the Bronco-Breaker, with a sneer; and he led the beautiful animal out upon the prairie some hundred feet from the camp, while Blue-eyed Billy went to his tent to make his preparations for the daring feat he intended to undertake to accomplish.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRONCO-BREAKER'S BADGE.

THE wagon train of which Blue-Eyed Billy and his mother were members was composed of several wagons, which had joined forces for mutual protection in their journey across the plains to new homes they had chosen on the Texas border.

Mrs. Powell had come from her home in New York State, where she had lived with her three sons upon a little farm, until the spirit of adventure had called two of her boys into more active fields than what falls to the lot of farmers' lives.

One of those boys was winning a name on the far frontier, and afterward became famous as "White Beaver, the Mighty Medicine," of an Indian tribe, and as "Fancy Frank," the hero of many a daring deed and romance.

The other had found his way to Texas, and there won a name as "Night-Hawk George," and it was to his ranch, over near the Rio Grande, that Mrs. Powell and Blue-Eyed Billy were going.

Neither the mother nor son particularly liked their fellow trains-people, but in the matter of choice they could not be particular under the circumstances.

Among the party, however, were the elderly man and his daughter before referred to, and these two had become most friendly with Mrs. Powell and her son.

The Powells were traveling with a large ambulance, drawn by two good mules, and behind were led a pair of saddle-horses, by no means inferior animals, which mother and son broke the tediousness of the journey by riding at will.

The ambulance contained all their worldly goods they cared to take to their new home, with a tent, culinary articles, and stores to make themselves comfortable by the way.

The Leonards, as the old gentleman and his daughter were called, the former being also dubbed "Captain," from his military air, also traveled in an ambulance, and had led horses, which were put to the pole, as were also the Powells', when the roughness of the road demanded extra force to pull through.

The rest of the train were wagons, and their owners were of a lower class in life, and certainly had a rough air about them.

"You do not intend that your son shall ride a horse that man says has killed so many people?" said Captain Leonard to Mrs. Powell, while Lou, his daughter, added:

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Powell! please do not permit it!"

"Billy is a born horseman," answered Mrs. Powell, with a smile, "and if anybody can ride the animal he can."

"But the man says no one can do so," urged Lou Leonard.

"He rides him," replied the mother.

"But he is his master."

"And Billy will master him too. See, he is ready."

Billy now came out of the little tent in his sock feet, but with his spurs buckled securely on, and in his hand he carried a cruel-looking rawhide.

He had discarded his jacket and had tied a handkerchief about his head, which held securely his long hair.

Around his legs were a pair of stout leather leggings, instead of his boot-tops, but he walked with the quick, nimble step habitual to him.

"Be careful, Billy," called out his mother.

"Yes, Billy, do be careful," echoed Cap-

tain Leonard, while his pretty daughter said:

"I do wish you would not ride that fearful beast, Billy."

"Ah, he's a beauty, and I'll soon have him so that you can ride him, Miss Lou," said the youth.

"Yer better say yer 'Now I lay me,' young'un," called out Rio Grande Rob, the Bronco-Breaker, with a rude laugh.

"You better say good-by to your horse, old man," was Billy's pest rejoinder.

"Say, youngster, thet fellow hain't actin' squar' with yer," said the guide in a whisper to Billy.

"How so, Tom?"

"Yer see ther gold horse-pin," he wears?"

"Yes."

"Waal, thet were gi'n him fer being ther boss Bronco-Breaker, and he were ter give it up also ter ther man as rid thet white devil o' his, and he didn't tell yer thet; but I knows it."

"Thank you, Tom. I'll make my terms with him then."

"Say, Bronco-Breaker, your horse is ready, is he?"

"Yes, boy."

"And if I ride him I win him, saddle, bridle, and all?"

"Yer does; and if yer don't, I gits yer thousand dollars."

"True, my mother has the money for you."

"Will she give it ter me, or keep it fer buryin' yer arter my white stallion has kilt yer?"

"My mother is honest, sir, which is more than you are, for if I ride your horse, there is one more thing I get," was the bold reply.

"What are that?"

"The badge you wear on your hat as the boss Bronco-Breaker."

The man's face, tanned as it was, flushed with anger, for it could not have been with shame, while he said:

"Yes, an' it will be on my hat when I goes ter yer fun'ral."

"We'll see about that; but if I ride the mustang, it will be on my hat."

"Yes, fer I might as well promise anything yer fancy."

"And I'll see that you keep your promises, too."

"Yer is cheeky fer a boy," growled the Bronco-Breaker.

"I have to be to watch the great Rio Grande Rob, the Bronco Breaker," and as Billy spoke, he darted toward the white mustang at the top of his speed, yelling like an Indian, and cutting the air before him with his whip.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY.

THE tactics of Blue-Eyed Billy in darting so suddenly at the vicious and untamed steed, excepting for the Bronco-Breaker, took all by surprise, and more particularly the master of the animal.

Rio Grande Rob well knew, when he las-soed Mephisto out upon the prairie, that no one could approach within the circle his lariat allowed him to go.

The horse had a wicked temper at best, and his life of wild freedom had made him most fretful under restraint, and to this the Bronco-Breaker had added by making him spring upon any one that came within reach of him.

"Ther horse will never be stole," he had often said, and when he lariatied out the animal near a camp, he was wont to retire to his blanket at night with no dread of losing him, although he knew there were many near who would be only too glad to run him off.

Several times had a wild shriek broken the stillness of a camp, startling the campers; but the Bronco-Breaker would quietly remark, as he turned over to continue his slumber:

"It is only some pilgrim tryin' ter steal my horse. Yer'll find him thar in the mornin'."

And, sure enough, the unfortunate horse-thief would be found near the quietly feeding stallion, when the dawn broke, and the trampled form was proof how he had met his death.

Rio Grande Rob therefore had no fear of Blue-Eyed Billy getting up to the stallion.

Was he once able to mount him, and could he stand the tearing of the white teeth at his legs, he might be able to ride him; but to mount him the Bronco-Breaker deemed impossible for other than himself.

When, therefore, he saw the manner in which Billy bounded toward the animal, he grew alarmed and shrieked: "Steady, horse, steady!"

But the stallion was taken by surprise to be the one attacked instead of the one attacking, and with a frightened snort started to run.

The whip cut the air viciously, the boy bounded along like a deer, and his yells were sufficient to frighten a wild beast from its prey, and the white stallion fled, until brought up suddenly by the lariat.

He seemed to have forgotten that in his flight, and was thrown down by the sudden jerk.

Just as he fell Billy reached the lariat-pin, drew it from the ground, and before the

frightened animal could regain his feet he sprung upon his back.

"Fight him, Devil, fight him!" yelled the Bronco-Breaker in fury and alarm, while Captain Leonard set the cheer that broke from all in camp excepting the owner of the animal that had been so cleverly mounted.

But Blue-Eyed Billy set the example of "fighting" by driving his spurs deep, and laying on his wicked lash with a force that raised huge welts on the glossy hide.

Snorting with pain and rage, the vicious stallion gave one grip at the daring boy's legs with his white teeth, and failed to hurt them, and, then, with a wild neigh, bounded away over the prairie with the speed of a bird.

"He'll kill him, but I'll bring yer boy's body back to yer," yelled the Bronco-Breaker, rushing to mount one of his herd and go in pursuit.

"And I will go with you," answered Mrs. Powell, firmly, starting for her own riding horse, which Captain Leonard quickly saddled for her.

"No, yer stay here!" yelled the infuriated man, and he darted away after the flying white stallion, which was seen dashing on across the prairie, still urged by the relentless whip and spur.

But Mrs. Powell did follow, and behind her came Captain Leonard and his daughter, and away sped the five over the prairie at a breakneck speed.

Then the speed of the white stallion was seen, for he dropped the five horses on his trail as readily as a thoroughbred racer would a farm-horse, and was soon a mile ahead.

Seeing that the youth would soon be out of sight, Rio Grande Rob drew rein, and turning back toward camp met Mrs. Powell and her companions, who halted as he came up.

"Waal, yer'll never see yer boy livin' no more," said the Bronco-Breaker.

"Oh, yes, for he'll soon be back in camp.

"He has won a splendid and wonderful horse, sir," replied Mrs. Powell, in her quiet way.

"He has indeed," remarked Captain Leonard.

"He hain't winned him yit," growled the man.

"Yes, he has, for he rode him, and will bring him back to camp a thoroughly tamed animal," put in Lou Leonard.

The Bronco-Breaker made no reply, but his looks spoke volumes, and in no enviable mood he retraced his way to camp, followed by the others, who were determined to watch him closely, for all felt that he meant mischief toward Blue-Eyed Billy rather than give up the horse.

CHAPTER V.

BRONCO BILLY.

It was evident to all at the camp when the mounted party returned without Billy that the boy was safe, and had won the horse, and had they doubted it, a glance at the face of the Bronco-Breaker was sufficient to prove that he knew that he had lost his wager.

Anxiously all watched the horizon for the returning youth, and several tried to draw Rio Grande Rob into conversation, but it was useless, and a silence fell upon the encampment, which added to the dread and suspense.

But Mrs. Powell looked wholly undisturbed, and her calm confidence in her son added fuel to the fire already burning in the heart of the Bronco-Breaker.

"I fear that man means not to give up his horse, Mrs. Powell," said Captain Leonard.

"He must do so, for Billy has done his part."

"But he may resist all pressure to do so, as it is evident he prizes the animal above all things."

"Billy has won him and he will have him," was the mother's reply, and Captain Leonard turned away with a foreboding of coming trouble.

"There he comes!"

The yell broke from the lips of the guide, and every eye was turned across the prairie.

There, a mile or more away, was visible the white stallion and his rider.

The animal came on at a slow, swinging lope, which showed that he was very tired, and as he drew nearer it could be seen that he was dripping wet with sweat, and his flanks were stained red where the spurs had gored him.

His head was no longer held aloft with pride, but bent low, as though his proud spirit had been humbled.

Billy too looked haggard, as though the struggle for mastery had been a hard one, and, as the lariat had been made into a temporary bridle, it was evident that the youth had dismounted and so arranged it, which convinced all that he had the splendid animal wholly under subjection.

Riding up in front of his tent, Billy dismounted at the cheer given him, and said, proudly:

"Well, my friend, I don't wonder that you liked that horse, for he is the finest I ever saw."

"Now I'll trouble you for the saddle and bridle that go with him."

"They don't go with him," growled the Bronco-Breaker.

"Oh, yes they do."

"You didn't ride him fair."

"Didn't I? Well, I rode him, and he's my horse."

"No, you run at him, skeert him, and when he were down, yer jumped onter him."

"Well, you admit I got on him, and if the camp says I did it fairly, then the horse is mine."

"What do you say, Tom?"

"It were done squar' as preachin'," returned the guide.

"And you?" and Billy turned to a group of the rougher element of the train.

"Yer rid him, an' we seen it did," said one, while the others remarked in the affirmative.

"Waal, I is a man o' my word, an' as yer rid ther horse, I'll jist give yer ther credit o' it, an' pay yer down one thousand dollars fer ther animile," said the Bronco-Breaker, drawing a roll of bank-notes from his pocket.

"He is not for sale," replied Billy.

"I'll make it two more hunderd."

"Not if you make it two thousand," firmly replied the boy.

"I'll give yer ther twelve hundred and your pick o' my herd."

"No."

"And ther bridle an' saddle as belongs to ther white stallion?"

"No, for they belong to me with the horse."

"Waal, yer is robbing me o' my horse."

As the man said this, Mrs. Powell stepped forward, and, bending over, whispered something to her son; but the quick eyes of Lou Leonard saw the mother slip her own revolver into the pistol pocket of Billy's leggings.

"Say, you are a cheat, for you made a fair bet with me, and I won it, and now you wish to crawfish out of it; but I tell you frankly, Rob of the Rio Grande, the horse, saddle, and bridle are mine, and I'll have them, and more, too."

The blue eyes of Billy Powell were growing black with anger, and all saw that, boy though he was, he was not one to be trifled with.

"Waal, ef yer hain't got grit ter spit out thet way at Rio Grande Rob, I'll give up," said the Bronco-Breaker, sneeringly.

"You are nobody to talk to, and you do not scare me for a cent; but come, I want the saddle and bridle."

"S'pose I say yer can't have them."

"Then I'll take them," was the bold reply.

"You jist lay hand onto them, an' I'll wring yer neck," viciously said the Bronco-Breaker.

Quicker than a flash Billy covered him with his revolver, and cried:

"Now you move, and I'll kill you."

"I are assaulted, an' by a boy," yelled the bully, in a fury.

"You'll be shot by a boy if you raise a finger."

"Now, mother, that man owes me that pin he wears on his hat, for that I won, too; so please take it off."

Mrs. Powell coolly stepped forward, took the sombrero from the head of the cursing, but quiet Bronco-Breaker, and took the champion badge from it, and handed it to Billy.

"Thank you, mother."

"Now, Tom," and Blue-Eyed Billy addressed the guide, though he did not take his eyes off of the bully:

"Just drag that saddle and bridle into my tent, please, but give this fellow anything he may have in the holsters or saddle pockets."

"I'll do it, Billy, and I are with yer, fer ther things are yourn," answered the guide, and the equipments of the white stallion were at once placed in Billy's tent.

"Now, Bronco-Breaker, you are free to go, for I have taken my own property only," and Billy lowered his weapon and turned away.

Then quick as a flash Rio Grande Rob dropped his hand upon his own revolver, his face livid with rage; but quick as he was, a hand was quicker than his, and the muzzle of a revolver was thrust against his ear, while the stern, calm voice of Mrs. Powell said:

"I expected that, you coward."

"Drop that weapon and leave this camp!"

"Quick!"

The act of Mrs. Powell was received with a yell by the crowd, and the guide and several others drew their weapons, while the former said:

"Bronco-Breaker, I knows it hurts yer, bad, ter give up yer horse, saddle an' bridle, an' 'specially thet badge o' a gold bronco; but ther boy hes won 'em squar', an' he hes got 'em, so you git, fer I rides with ther youngster who I now christens *Bronco Billy*."

The defeated bully stooped, took up his revolver, and turned away with a savage curse, while Billy called out:

"Say, Rio Grande Rob, I'm going on a hunt soon for the black stallion you spoke of, and if you get him first, I'll strike a trade with you."

The man turned furiously around, and answered:

"All right, boy; I dare yer ter go after thet black stallion, fer ef yer does, yer'll find the Bronco-Breaker on yer trail hot."

"And the Bronco-Breaker will find Bronco Billy, as the guide calls me, ready for him."

"Now get, unless you want to sell me a horse."

But the Bronco-Breaker had no such a desire, and collecting his traps, he got his herd together, and mounting one of the best of the animals, rode from camp, followed by his pets, and leaving what he prized as his own life in the possession of a boy who had well earned them.

CHAPTER VI.

BRONCO BILLY HUNTS FOR DEER AND FINDS TIGERS.

SOME days after the incident just related, Billy Powell, or Bronco Billy as I must now call him, mounted his well-earned white mustang, and rode ahead of the train while on the march, to get some game for his mess, which consisted of his mother, Captain Leonard, and Lou and himself.

He came to a rise in the prairie that showed him afar off a herd of deer feeding, and to get in gunshot of them he knew would be impossible, unless he dismounted and crept as near as he could.

He was a good huntsman, noticed the direction in which they were feeding, took the quarter of the wind, and dismounting, lariatd Mephisto out to feed in a hollow where he would not be visible.

Making a circuit on foot he again took an observation of his game, and saw that they were going toward a timber island not far from him.

This piece of timber, or *motte*, he easily gained, and securing a hiding-place in the thicket, quietly waited for the coming of the herd, which were feeding slowly toward him.

As he lay there, wholly concealed by the thicket, he was suddenly startled by footsteps behind him, and not knowing who to expect, he lay still as a mouse.

Soon there came into sight three men from the train, and burly fellows whom Billy had never liked.

But knowing from their actions that the herd of deer were their aim, as well as his own, he was about to show himself, when one of them said:

"Waal, I doesn't object ter deer-meat, but I is more intent on ther game at ther train, and I moves we don't lose no more time, but strike 'em ter-night."

"Waal, Bolt, I are yer way o' thinkin', fer we'll be gittin' too near ther fort soon ter make ther attack on 'em, an' git away in safety," said another.

"Does yer say," asked the third man of the party, "ter hit all in ther train, or simply ther woman an' her cheeky boy?"

"I means ter hit all in ther train as hes

plunder, fer what we can't git away with we can burn."

"Ther cap'n has got plenty o' dust, as I knows, an' ther Powells hes got a couple o' thousan' or more o' gold, an' ther balance o' ther emigrants hes a leetle more, which, with finger-rings, jewelry, firearms an' sich, makes a s'pectable sum fer us six ter derwide," said the first speaker.

"An' we six hes ter fight about eight men?"

"No; fer six of them men kin go down fust shot, an' ther balance kin foller mighty quick, fer they'll be taken wholly by surprise."

"But yer didn't count ther woman an' ther boy."

"No, an' they is tigers, I'll bet, fer they jist upsot Rio Grande Rob t'other day atween 'em."

"Waal, pards, I, as cap'n o' ther Secret Sarvice Rangers, says thet I doesn't like goin' fer ther poor emigrants."

"Cap'n Leonard an' the Powells is rich, an' we kin git out o' them a thousan' each, countin' ther gold, an' the plunder an' teams will fetch about two thousan' more."

"So I says let us hit them, an' do it in our Injun disguises, an' let up on ther balance o' ther train."

"Yer knows best, cap'n," said one.

"I are agreeable, cap'n."

"Waal, pards, my plan are this:

"Yer see, them two ambulances allers is tergether, so I'll saw ther axles, lead 'em over rough kentry to-morrer, an' let them break down."

"Then we'll go on ter camp with balance o' train, promising ter come back fer 'em."

"An' we'll go back, but in our Injun togs, an' at night, an' hit 'em hard, an' then four o' us kin go back ter camp an' tell of a Injun attack an' mass'cree, an' thet two o' our lot got kilt, an' we buried all tergether."

"Thet will make ther guide anxious ter push on with balance of train, an' the two of our gang who is supposed ter be kilt will jist sail off with ther plunder an' sell it in town."

"What says yer, pards?"

"Cap'n, yer is level-headed," replied one, while the other villain remarked:

"Yer hes sense, sure; but yonder comes them deer."

"Yes, they are coming straight fer us, so we is good fer fresh meat; but I wish we c'u'd find thet cussed boy, fer I claims thet white horse, pards."

"Yer kin hev him, cap'in, fer all I says; but ef yer ever meets Rio Grande Rob he'll git him from yer if he kin."

"Yas, ef he kin, fer I'll warrant he are a

layin' round somewhar now a-lookin' fer that boy ter take a ride."

"But, Sam, yer take ther stag on ther left; I'll knock over ther one on ther right. An' you, Bolt, jist take that big doe."

With the last words of the speaker their three rifles flashed, and they bounded forward to get their game, for their aim had been unerring.

And as they left the shelter of the timber Bronco Billy sprung from his hiding-place and ran like a deer back into the woodland, and thus out upon the prairie, in the direction of the hollow where he had left his horse, for all that he had heard opened his eyes to a devilish plot one part of the train members had against the other.

CHAPTER VII.

BRONCO BILLY SURPRISED.

FOR half a mile did Bronco Billy keep up his rapid run, and until a rise of the prairie hid him from the view of any one at the timber.

Then he sat down to rest and await to see if any of the precious trio of villains had seen him.

But no one came in pursuit, and he congratulated himself upon being in possession of a valuable secret, which he was not suspected of knowing, for forewarned of the danger threatening him he was forearmed.

As he ruminated over the plot of the men who had called themselves the Secret Service Rangers, he recalled many incidents that had seemed strange to him.

In fact, their teams had been of the poorest kind, and the six occupants of the two wagons had kept constantly together.

There were four men and two others whom he now knew were not women, but pretending to be such, and twice had his mother spoken of how masculine they were in their actions and voices.

There were others of the train that Bronco Billy would like to have warned, and with their aid captured the six Secret Service Rangers, but he feared to divulge the secret he knew, as they seemed of a class to side with the robbers to save themselves.

He had heard of a band of men who had gone with emigrant trains, pretending to be settlers, and who had proved but wolves in sheep's wool, and now he was to experience just what these wretches were in reality.

"I guess I'll think out some plot to beat them at their own game," he muttered, as he took up his rifle and moved on to where he had left Mephisto, who, since his perfect mastery by the boy, seemed as gentle as a lamb with him.

Before rising above the knoll behind which

was Mephisto the boy instinctively stopped.

A foreboding of trouble, such as all of us have experienced at times in our lives, came over him, and he quietly crept up to the top of the rise and looked over.

It was no wonder that he turned pale as he looked.

Not that Mephisto had gone, for the horse was still there.

And he was not alone, for another animal, saddled and bridled was by his side, but worse still there was a horseman with them.

And that horseman was just putting the bridle upon Mephisto, with the apparent intention of stealing the animal.

There was but one man, Bronco Billy knew well, that could put a bridle upon Mephisto, and the one performing that act was the one.

It was Rio Grande Rob, the Bronco-Breaker.

"He has given me a surprise and I'll astonish him," muttered Bronco Billy, and he threw his rifle forward and stepped over the rise in the prairie, unseen by Rio Grande Rob.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WELL-MEANT SHOT.

THE back of Rio Grande was in the direction from which he had least expected danger, for the trail of the boy had led the way he faced.

The youth he did not really fear, though he knew it was well to be on his guard with him, as he had fully experienced that Bronco Billy possessed a pluck worthy of any man.

He had been hanging on the trail of the train, after having gone to the settlement nearest, and disposed of all but the best bronco in his herd, and was watching for the very opportunity which Billy had given him by riding off alone, for he was determined to get his white stallion back again, cost what it might.

From a distant point he had seen the youth leave camp, and making a wide circuit had struck his trail, and come upon the bronco feeding quietly in the hollow.

"This are prime luck fer me, fer it are more pleasanter ter git my horse honest like, then ter hev ter kill ther boy.

"I doesn't mind killin' a Greaser, or a Injun, an' I hain't so *very* compunct'us 'bout killin' a nigger or a white man, but when it do come ter slayin' wimmens an' boys, then I does take a back seat.

"Waal, I hes my horse back, an' as ther boy hain't no trailer, though he do find his way well on ther pararer fer a tenderfoot infant, he'll think ther bronco hes jist got loose an' levanted all by hisself— *Durnation in church! but I is bagged.*"

The man had turned suddenly, upon hearing his name called, and beheld the object of his thoughts before him.

Not twenty paces distant stood Bronco Billy, his rifle at his shoulder, and his eye running along the sights, while the muzzle of the weapon covered the large Texan.

"I've got the drop on you, Rio Grande Rob," he said quietly.

"Yer hes fer sure, or I is a dreamin' fool," was the calm reply.

"You have been caught in a bad scrape."

"It do look so, son."

"Stealing my horse."

"Waal, I were about to borryer him for a period o' time," was the philosophical rejoinder.

"Horse-stealing in Texas, I am told, is a hanging affair."

"Yas, but they allus catches ther man afore they hangs him."

"Well, you are caught," was the smiling reply.

"Yer thinks so, does yer, sonny?" and as quick as a flash the man's hand was drawing a revolver from his belt.

But the quick eyes of Billy caught the act, and his nerve not failing him, he drew trigger.

Down in his tracks fell the Texan with the report, and just in the nick of time, for he would have killed Bronco Billy a second after, as he was raising his revolver to fire when the bullet struck him.

The boy stood an instant after his shot, pale, anxious-faced, and evidently deeply moved by his act.

"I am sorry, but he would have killed me, and he had no right to follow me to steal my pony," he said, as he advanced almost on tip-toe to the prostrate form.

It was the first time he had ever stood over the body of one he had shot down, and the thought touched him to the heart.

A moment he stood there, gazing down with awe upon the cruel, blood-stained face, and then bent over and placed his hand upon the wound, which was upon the temple.

As he did so his hand was suddenly seized in an iron grip, and the man he had believed dead dragged him to the earth, and in an instant he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER IX.

MATCHED BY A BOY.

"SONNY, yer shot were well meant, but I hes a hard head, a werry hard head, an' a leetle cuttin' o' ther skin on it don't hurt much, though I did see stars for a minute when I went down. Yer sh'u'd allus be sure of yer game, my boy; an' ef yer had sent a second bullet inter my carkis yer w'u'd

hev hed me sure, but yer d'fdn't, an' ther result are thet I hes yer in my grip."

All this was said by the Bronco-Breaker while he was tying Billy fast, for seeing that it was useless to struggle against the man's giant strength, Billy had not only quietly submitted but had held his wrists crossed to aid in their being securely tied.

The gash over his temple made by Billy's bullet the Texan did not seem to care for in the least, for having bound the youth's hands he raised him to the saddle of the horse he had ridden and then mounted the white stallion himself.

"Come along, leetle pard, an' I'll make yer a present ter a Injun tribe I is on good farms with. Yer mammy will cry 'bout it, like as not, an' think yer hes been murdered, but I can't help thet, as I hes ter look out fer Rio Grande Rob, he bein' my bosom friend, yer know. The Injuns will 'dopt yer inter ther tribe if yer is a good boy, an' ef yer hain't they'll scalp yer, so yer'll know what ter do. Now I wants yer to foller me, an' fer fear o' accidints, which is liable to occur with a boy o' your grit, I'll jist hold on ter ther lariat as is hitched around thet horse yer straddles."

Bronco Billy made no reply, but accepted his fate with calm resignation.

His belt of arms and rifle had been taken by the Bronco-Breaker and hung upon the horn of the superb Mexican saddle on the white stallion, and the small rifle that had so nearly cost him his life was also appropriated by the man.

"Now," he said, as he was ready to mount, "I guesses yer hes wore that bronco pin o' mine long enough, so I'll jist take it out o' your hat, an' put it in mine ag'in."

He at once did as he threatened, but Bronco Billy showed no sign of regret.

Mounting the stallion, and taking the end of the lariat, which was around the neck of the other horse, the Bronco-Breaker rode off, the animal which Billy bestrode trotting quietly along in the rear.

After a mile had been gone over Billy suddenly raised his wrists and took a look at the bonds.

Then he smiled, for he had played a trick upon his captor when he bound him.

When he put his wrists together he had placed the lower side of one upon the upper side of the other, which turned the palms of his hands out.

Now he twisted his wrists, so that the palm of one hand was up and the other down, and this at once showed that the former way of holding them had taken more rope by an inch or two to go around them than when they lay flat together.

His hands being small, with the aid of his

teeth to hold the rope in place, he managed to work his right one loose, the while keeping his eyes upon the tall form in his front.

Once one was free, it was but the work of an instant to free the other.

Then his eyes sparkled, for he had seen another thoughtless act of the Bronco-Breaker, and that was to forget to deprive him of the revolver he carried in the holster of his boot-leg.

This was grasped quickly, and with his heels, he quietly urged the horse he rode to a quicker pace, which brought him just behind the black stallion.

"I say, Rio Grande Rob!" he called out.

The Texan turned with an indifferent air, to suddenly become pale, while a startled oath escaped his lips.

"I is caught ag'in," he said.

"You certainly are, Rio Grande Rob, and let me give you a piece of advice.

"Always be sure you tie your prisoner securely, and disarm him— Hold on! if you move I'll kill you!"

The man saw that the boy was his match, and the revolver that covered him was cocked and held in a hand that did not have the slightest tremor about it.

"Halt!"

"Here goes," and the Texan drew rein.

Billy rode right up to the man and said:

"I'll take my rifle now."

With the revolver still covering the man, he took the weapon.

"Now my belt of arms," and these were as quietly appropriated.

"Your weapons next," and these followed.

"Dismount, sir!"

This was the next order, and it was promptly obeyed, though the Texan said, sullenly:

"I guess my horse goes, too."

"No, my horse I shall take; but I am not like you, a thief.

"But I'll trouble you for that bronco pin in your hat."

"Durnation! Thet are my badge o' ther boss breaker o' broncos."

"It is mine now, and my intention is to earn the right to wear it before I have been in Texas long."

As Billy spoke, he made the Texan throw the pin upon the pile of arms, and then said:

"Now walk off there forty paces."

"Does yer intend to shoot me?"

"No, I only intend to protect myself.

"Do as I say!"

The Bronco-Breaker could but obey, and then Billy put his pin back in his hat, buckled on his belt of arms once more, slung his rifle at his back, and shortening the stirrups, mounted the white stallion, he having las-

soed the other horse out, with the Texan's weapons hanging upon the horn of his saddle.

"Now, Rio Grande Rob, my rifle kills a long way off, and if you move from that spot until I get out of range, I will kill you.

"When you see me ride on and take no further notice of you, take your horse and go your way; but I warn you not to let it be *my* way.

"Good-by, Texas Robbie," and with a light laugh Bronco Billy rode away, leaving the Bronco-Breaker livid with rage; but knowing well he could not overtake the white stallion, should the youth choose to fly, and that, without a rifle, the boy with his, could hold him at bay, and might, perhaps, be provoked to kill him.

CHAPTER X.

BRONCO BILLY'S PLOT.

WITHOUT further adventure, and without game, Bronco Billy reached the train, which was still on the march.

His mother soon saw that something had gone wrong with him, for he wore a worried look, which not finding game could not bring to his face.

She was driving the ambulance, and she called to Billy to come alongside.

He was riding with Lou Leonard, while her father was driving his ambulance; but Billy at once rode nearer to his mother, who asked, quietly:

"Well, Billy, what is it?"

"What is what, mother?"

"What worries you?"

"Am I worried, mother?"

"Yes, Billy."

"Well, I am, mother, I confess, for I heard something I do not like, and if you and Captain Leonard will promise to be guided by me, I will tell you what it is."

"Perhaps you better tell us, and then we can decide what is best to be done, Billy."

"I have decided, mother, and I am confident that I know what is best in the matter, though of course I don't wish to act against your wishes, and what Captain Leonard might think."

"Well, what is it, Billy?"

"Those men in the lead are outlaws."

"What?" asked Mrs. Powell, in surprise.

"They are a gang known as the Secret Service Rangers, and they join honest trains crossing the prairies, watch their chance, disguise themselves as Indians, and attack the richer wagon owners, and get what spoils they can, and Captain Leonard and ourselves are now marked for their work."

Mrs. Powell looked astounded, but Billy went on to tell her all that he had heard, and

then of his adventure with Rio Grande Rob.

Not wishing to attract the attention of the men, who had joined the train again at noon-day, he dismounted and walked along by the ambulance for awhile, repeating his story, without looking back, to Lou Leonard, and she told it to her father.

"I will at once make the plot known to the guide, and with the good members of the train we will capture these wretches, and severely punish them," said Captain Leonard, sternly, and he sprung from the ambulance, and came forward and joined Billy.

"No, Captain Leonard, that will never do, for the honest members of the train are a bad lot, and will side with the outlaws.

"To talk with the guide now would excite suspicion, and bring on the attack at once.

"These men are desperate fellows, sir, and I have a plan to escape them."

"I have confidence in you, Billy, and will be guided by you in the matter," frankly said Captain Leonard.

"I believe our ambulance is better than yours, sir?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, suppose you break your vehicle down, when we have passed yonder piece of timber, and I will stay back to help you mend it, or at least I will say so, while the train goes on to the motte far ahead to camp.

"You can tell them, if we don't repair damages by night we will camp in that little motte, but if we do we will come on.

"That is just what they want, and by midnight they will come back secretly to attack us."

"Well, Billy, I can't see but that they'll get the best of us too," said Captain Leonard.

"We will not be here for them to get the best of us."

"What do you mean to do?"

"We can, as soon as it is dark, put what things you must carry into our ambulance, and throw out from ours what we do not really need, and with an extra fore and hind wheel from your vehicle, to aid us if we break down, we will start across the prairie on our own hook and defy pursuit."

"Without a guide, Billy?"

"Yes, sir, for I feel I am able to act as guide."

"It is our best plan, I guess."

"I will tell mother about it, sir, and see what she thinks of my plot."

The boy then told his mother, and she acquiesced fully in it, and the result was that Captain Leonard dropped back to his ambulance, and with a wrench soon unscrewed the nuts as he walked along, and before very

long the crash came, and the vehicle was broken down.

"Don't delay the train, for I can soon fix all right," called out the captain, as several of the wagons came to a halt.

"I will stay and help you, captain, and let the others go on," said Billy, and he saw the three men whom he had overheard making the plot against them talking together, and heard one say:

"Luck hes aided us, pards, an' ter-night we'll drop back an' do ther biz, for they'll never git thet spring mended afore it are dark."

Then he turned to Captain Leonard and said:

"Cap'n, we camps in yonder timber, five mile away, an' ef yer hain't movin' toward it by dark, we'll come back an' give yer a lift."

"Thank you; but if we get it mended I'll camp in this timber near by, and make an early start, so as to overtake you before you break camp," responded the captain.

"All right, sir; but we hain't the boys ter see a pard in distress an' not come back to help him, so you kin expect us afore midnight, only don't shoot at us for Injuns."

"No danger; but wait until midnight before you come, for we will be along, as after all it is best for us to come on to-night," was the captain's reply, as he was anxious to gain all the time they could.

The train then moved on, and at once the captain and Billy lariatd the horses out to feed and rest, to prepare them for the night's work before them, and they then removed all the things from the ambulance, as though they intended repairing it.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLIGHT.

"WELL, luck favors us so far," said Captain Leonard, as he saw the sun touch the horizon, and found that no one of the train had taken it into his head to return to their aid.

"Yes, sir; and we will have good six miles start of them, and comparatively fresh horses," said Billy, glancing at the animals, who were greatly refreshed by their rest of several hours.

As soon as the motte grew misty with the approaching night, the articles of value were transferred from the prairie to the ambulance of the Powells, who had thrown out all from their vehicle that was not absolutely needed.

The ambulance had also been overhauled

most thoroughly, every bolt having been looked to and every nut tightened.

Then Billy and the captain dragged the cast-off luggage to the timber near by, and made a pile of it, which was set afire.

"They sha'n't have it," said Billy, "and they'll think we have finished repairs and gone into camp here, so will not hurry to come after us."

The two teams were then hitched to the Powell ambulance, the riding horses were led by Mrs. Powell and Lou Leonard, who had mounted their own animals, and Bronco Billy took the lead on Mephisto.

At a word the small party of fugitives moved away over the prairie, now under the darkness of night, and the well-greased ambulance rolled along easily, drawn by its double team.

At a fair trot they held on, Billy leading the way, just far enough in advance to check the captain from driving into any buffalo-wallow or prairie-dog hole, that might break the ambulance down, and only the tread of hoofs and occasional creaking of the vehicle could be heard.

Far away behind them could be seen the dying out fire in the timber, which showed that their luggage was passing beyond the hands of the outlaws, and to the eastward, many miles away, the glimmer of the camp-fires of the train were visible.

Soon these disappeared altogether, and the fugitives were alone upon the prairie, depending wholly upon Bronco Billy for guidance, for a woodsman from boyhood, and a devoted pupil of Tom the guide since entering Texas, the youth had become no mean prairie-man, and had astonished all in the train by his apt way of picking up information necessary for a good plainsman to know.

With a rest on the banks of a stream, of an hour, at midnight, the party again pressed on in their flight, anxious to put as much distance as possible between them and their foes by daylight, and which they hoped would prevent them from pursuing them.

But even Bronco Billy could not fathom the deviltry in the hearts of the Secret Service Rangers, and their bloodhound tenacity in following their game.

CHAPTER XII.

HUMAN HOUNDS ON THE TRAIL.

THE six villains who belonged to the robber band known as the Secret Service Rangers, had not the slightest suspicion of being known to be what they were by Bronco Billy and Captain Leonard, so felt no anxiety

when the ambulance broke down, and thus detained their intended victims.

In fact, they felt that accident had brought on just what they wished to occur, which was to get the captain and Powells away from the rest of the train, so that they would not be suspected by any one of massacring them, and the crime might be laid upon the broad shoulders of some roving band of Indians, who already were weighted down with the sins which were put upon them.

When they saw the firelight in the timber, they concluded that the ambulance had been repaired, but too tired to come on that night, they had concluded to wait until morning.

Therefore they seemed in no hurry about their attack, and only after supper one proposed to go back and look up their friends.

The six at once mounted their horses, and refusing the aid of others, set out for the distant clump of timber, where the supposed camp-fire was glimmering.

Upon their arrival there they plotted to simply shoot down the captain and Billy, and carry Mrs. Powell and Lou Leonard off into the Indian villages, that they might curry favor thereby with the red-skins.

But, to their amazement, they soon saw that no one was about the camp-fire, and that it had not been composed of timber.

In dismay they rode out to the spot upon the prairie where the ambulance had broken down.

The vehicle was there, stripped of its luggage, and deserted.

Then they believed that the captain had packed his things in the Powell ambulance, and shabbily burned what he could not carry, instead of giving them to the poorer people of the train.

"We'll find 'em at our camp arter all," said one.

"Nary, fer ther trail don't lead thet way," said another.

"Thet are so," cried a third, and the good trailers, but wicked men, at once set to work to follow the trail.

Then, as they saw the direction in which it led, they began to feel that they were fooled.

"It are thet boy," said one.

"Yas, he hev smelt a mice, an' he hev did this."

"Yer is right, pard, fer he are smarter then a fox an' prairie-dog made inter one.

"But I'm guessin' we kin overhaul 'em.

"You, pards," and he addressed two of the gang, "go back ter camp, an' say ther Injuns hev bagged ther cap'n an' ther balance, an' we is on ther trail.

"Tell ther guide ter go on with ther train,

an' we'll foller arter, an' you come arter us with wittals, an' come ter stay."

The two men rode back toward the camp, while the other four followed slowly upon the trail of their intended victims.

By dawn they were overtaken by their comrades, and then they could more rapidly pursue their way, for the trail was a broad one.

The further they followed it, the more they were convinced that the party were led by some good prairie-man, for, as their leader said:

"Pards, thet boy are some, I'll admit, but he can't go through this kentry as he are doin' onless he were born on ther pararer.

"See, they hes turned off this new trail leadin' ter ther Injun kentry, an' it are well fer them they hes.

"Yer see, they goes ter ther sou'west heur, an' thet'll fetch 'em ter ther fort settlement, an' so I says they hes got some one as knows ther kentry ter sarcumvent ther trails as they is doin'."

This was the idea of all, for no guide of the prairies could have taken a better course than the one which the fugitives were pursuing.

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER FEATHER IN BILLY'S CAP.

It was noon, of the day following their desertion of the wagon-train, that the four fugitives came to a halt under the shelter of some trees bordering a swiftly running stream.

They had pushed their horses hard, and determined to stop until nearly sunset for a long rest, for both human and brute nature were well tired out, excepting the white stallion alone, who seemed not to mind in the least the hard trip.

After lariatting out the horses, the party sat down to a really tempting dinner, cooked by Mrs. Powell and Lou, and then sought their blankets for a nap.

But, boy-like, Billy was too wakeful to sleep, and after an hour's dozing, arose and looked about him.

The horses had eaten their fill and were lying down, and the captain, his mother and Lou were fast asleep in the shade.

As Billy gazed upon the scene, suddenly out of a canyon, a mile away, where were the foot-hills of a high range, dashed two horses.

Both had riders, and a glance was sufficient to show that they were Indians.

They were heading in a direction that would lead them within a quarter of a mile of the camp, and Billy knew that the trees hid him and his camp from view.

Taking a field-glass, which he had been wearing all day, he turned it upon the two riders, and at once he called out:

"Captain, there's an Indian coming, and he's got a red-skin girl prisoner, for she is tied to her horse, and the warrior holds the rein."

The captain was very sound asleep; but he heard Billy's cry, and roused himself as quickly as he could.

When he did so, he found Bronco Billy throwing his saddle on Mephisto, and with his rifle slung at his back.

"What is it, Billy?" he called out.

"That Indian is running off with a girl, and I intend to stop it," shouted the youth, as he threw himself into his saddle, and darted out of the shelter of the timber.

In vain did the captain call to him to come back, and his cries awakening Mrs. Powell and Lou, they also shouted to him, but without any effect, for the white stallion flew on like the wind directly toward the Indian and his captive.

The warrior seemed so much taken up with his flight and his captive, and an occasional glance behind him, that he failed to observe Bronco Billy until he had come within an eighth of a mile of him.

Then he quickly drew rein, gazed an instant at him, and held on his former course, though at an increased speed.

Bronco Billy saw the Indian girl had also caught sight of him, for she called out in one long, clear cry, as though for aid.

"Come, Mephisto, now show what you can do," cried Billy, and he let the white stallion out.

The horses upon which the Indians were mounted were running well, but the white rapidly gained upon them, and as he drew nearer, Billy unslung his rifle ready for use.

The chief, for he wore the head-gear and trappings of such, gazed at the swiftly-coming horse in surprise, and raised his rifle ready for use.

Bronco Billy was now within a hundred yards of the chief and his captive, and directly behind them, the course he had taken having brought him out at a point in their rear.

Seeing the act of the chief, he watched most attentively, and urged Mephisto on.

As the chief saw that his horses were no match for the magnificent animal on their trail, he turned quickly in his saddle, and, raising his rifle, one of an old-fashioned style, fired full at the youth.

"Whew! that cut near, Mephisto, but it missed us," cried Bronco Billy, urging his horse forward still faster, and coming within fifty yards of the warrior before he had time to reload.

Then Billy suddenly drew rein, and not wishing to risk a shot at full speed, and springing to the ground, threw his rifle across the saddle and fired, just as the Indian was again raising his weapon to do likewise.

"Ha, ha, Mephisto, I got him!" shouted Billy, as he saw the Indian chief drop his rifle, reel, and then fall from his saddle, while the two horses sped on.

Mounting quickly, Bronco Billy again darted forward like the wind.

As he drew near the prostrate warrior he saw him rolling in death-agonies, and unheeding him, other than to pass by with a shudder, he held on after the flying horses, which were tied together.

Mephisto understood what was wanted, and in a very few moments ran alongside of the riderless horse.

Seizing the rein, Billy drew him to a halt, and the one on which the captive was mounted had to stop also.

The youth beheld a handsome Indian girl of eighteen, bedecked out in gold bands, silver spangles, beads, and a handsomely-worked buckskin dress and leggings, while a coronet of gayly-dyed feathers was upon her head. She was bound hand and foot and firmly to the Indian saddle, and to his surprise spoke to him in English.

"The pale-faces have brave young warriors," she said.

"I saw you were in trouble and came to help you," modestly replied Billy.

"The pale-face boy will make a great chief, for he has killed Black Buffalo, the Apache."

"He is a great chief, I have heard."

"Yes, and the foe of Dove Eye, who is a Comanche. He came by night and stole her from the wigwam of her father, who is Wolf-Killer, the chief."

"Ah! you are the daughter of Wolf-Killer, the great Comanche chief?" said Billy, who had heard of the Indian in many a camp-fire story as chief of a large tribe.

"Yes; and though the pale-faces hate my people, they will not be cruel to me, as the Black Buffalo would have been."

"Oh, no! good pale-faces don't make war on women. But how far is your camp from here?"

"What your people call thirty miles."

"Well, can you go there alone?"

"Oh, yes!" and the maiden's eyes flashed with hope.

"Then I'll untie you and let you go back to your father; but first come to my camp and get something to eat and rest awhile."

"The Dove Eye will go, for the little pale-face brave is very good to her; but will he not take the scalp of the Black Buffalo?" she

asked, as, after freeing her, Bronco Billy started in a direction for the camp that would not take him by the chief he had shot.

"I guess not, for I don't hanker after scalps."

"Then the Dove Eye will take it, in memory of the little brave of the pale-faces, and she will show it to her father and tell him."

She turned toward the spot where the chief lay in the grass, and Bronco Billy followed her, hardly knowing what to do, as he was not one to like cruelty and hated to see a scalp torn from the head of a human being.

But Dove Eye dismounted, asked for the youth's knife, and with a skill not to be expected of her, quickly severed the war-lock from the head of the chief, who had hardly been a minute dead.

His weapons, war-bonnet and necklace of claws she then handed to Billy with the remark:

"The little warrior of the pale-faces must take these and the pony of the Black Buffalo, while Dove-Eye keeps the scalp."

"I'll do it; but look there! Now I'm in for it!" and Billy pointed to where four Indian horsemen were visible, approaching them at a rapid gallop, and coming from the foothills.

CHAPTER XIV.

INDIAN FRIENDS.

THE unwelcome discovery made by Bronco Billy put him at once on his guard, and he was ready to retreat or fight in an instant, as the case might turn out.

But Dove Eye called out:

"It is the father of Dove Eye—the chief, Wolf-Killer."

"I hope he won't turn *boy-killer*," muttered Billy, remembering that he had heard how bloodthirsty a wretch the old chief was.

"My father fights the pale-faces because they hunt him; but he likes them, and the pale-faces had me prisoner for three years, and then sent me back to my people."

"The Dove Eye will tell the Wolf-Killer all about the Little Brave," said the Indian girl.

Seeing that the maiden was not bound, and was waiting for them, the coming Indians put up their weapons, and soon approached the spot where Billy waited with the girl, and, it must be confessed, with some trepidation.

He saw that the chief was a man of massive frame and stern face, and that he had his sharp eyes on him, as had also his three warrior comrades.

They showed no sign of surprise at beholding the dead chief, Black Buffalo, but

listened attentively to Dove Eye while she told how she had been riding some distance from the village, when a stranger Indian, who had been received into the camp some days before, threw off the guise he wore and appeared in his real self as Black Buffalo, the Apache, and had carried her off captive.

The girl spoke in her native tongue, and in reply her father said that he had come upon the trail of her pony, noticed that there had been a scuffle, and calling to the three warriors who were hunting with him, had followed her, and been a witness of the rescue by the youth.

This Dove Eye interpreted to Billy, and then the old chief held out his hand and said they would be friends.

Bronco Billy was hugely tickled at this, and, through Dove Eye, invited the party to his camp, where he amazed all, and frightened them, too, by appearing with the wild-looking Indians.

But his mother and the Leonards had seen his gallant rescue of Dove Eye, and they were at once drawn toward the girl most kindly, though they feared her father and his warriors to such an extent that they most emphatically refused an invitation to visit the Indian village.

"But why are the pale-faces here, where their red foes may fall upon them at any moment?" asked Dove Eye.

Captain Leonard explained their escape from the train, and Dove Eye interpreted it to her father, who said a few words in a low, earnest tone.

Turning to Billy, Dove Eye said:

"The Wolf-Killer talks well, for he says the bad faces will come on your trail and attack you."

"We expect that," answered Billy.

"How many are there?"

"Six, I know of."

"And you are two?"

"No, four, for my mother and this lady are good shots."

Dove Eye shook her head, and again spoke to her father.

He spoke in reply in the same earnest way, and then Dove Eye said:

"My father, the Wolf-Killer, says wait for your foes here, and he and his warriors will help you, or you can go on and we will wait and ambush your enemies."

"No, we are not that kind of people, my girl," said Captain Leonard, quickly, "to allow others to fight our battles; but, if in return for the good deed my young friend has done you, your father and his warriors wish to serve us, we will gladly accept their aid, for we need it."

Dove Eye interpreted what the captain had

said, and then Wolf-Killer made known his plan of action, and the pale-faces and red-skins at once became the best of friends, through Bronco Billy's brave act, when otherwise had it been, they would have fought each other at sight.

CHAPTER XV.

THE AMBUSH.

WITH thorough Indian cunning Wolf-Killer developed his plan to thwart the pursuers of the little party, to whom he owed so much in having saved, by their presence there, his dearly-loved daughter.

His admiration of Bronco Billy was very great, and he told Dove Eye to tell the youth that he had killed, in Black Buffalo, a man whom his tribe had really feared, and who had taken the scalps of over a score of his warriors in single combat.

He also hinted that he would like to have him as one of his braves, and that no matter what might be the trouble between his tribe and other whites, Billy and his friends would always be as his own people.

The plan of the old chief was for the ladies to go to a safe place under the shelter of the river bank, a large camp-fire to be built, as soon as it grew dark, which would shine brightly upon the white tilt of the ambulance and the canvas tent, and then two dummies to be dressed up as the captain and Billy, and be sitting near the fire, while an Indian in a tree overhead would, with strings, move the arms and body a little, to give an appearance of life to them.

All entered into the plot with alacrity, and two of the warriors were sent back on the trail to await the coming of the Secret Service Rangers, and then come back in haste and report.

The warriors started just before sunset, but soon after dark returned, and reported that they had seen seven horsemen, all pale-faces, coming afar off on the prairie, and following directly upon the trail left by the ambulance.

At this Captain Leonard at once led Mrs. Powell and Lou to the spot selected for them a hundred yards away, and insisted that Dove Eye should go too, which she did with reluctance, for the Indian girl was one that longed to mingle in a scene of excitement.

Then wood was thrown upon the fire, the horses were gotten out of range of any stray bullets, and the dummies were set, while the Indian who was to work them took his place in a tree overhead.

In different positions then Wolf-Killer and his other two braves took their stands, and Captain Leonard and Bronco Billy also were well placed.

It was an hour before a sound was heard, and then there came a smothered neigh off on the prairie.

Half an hour more passed, and a warning sound was given by Wolf-Killer, whose keen eyes had seen dark forms moving upon the camp.

They were soon seen by the others too, and seven were counted, creeping cautiously toward the camp.

"Seven against six, Billy, but I have no fear of the result," whispered Captain Leonard.

"Lordy! captain, just look how that Indian in the tree is making your dummy move.

"They'll think you've got the colic," said Billy in response, for the youth's love of the ridiculous did not let the queer antics of the dummies escape him.

Nearer and nearer approached the seven forms, crouching as they came, for they were on foot, and coming in a line about ten feet apart, directly for the camp.

Presently they halted, and then a deep voice cried:

"Let 'em hev it, pards!"

Seven rifles cracked together, and the dummies were knocked over.

But at the same moment four fearful Comanche yells were heard, and six rifles flashed together.

Instantly three men fell in their tracks, and four men turned to fly.

One fell, after staggering a few feet, another soon after went down, but two managed to get away in the darkness.

Hot on the trail, and thirsting for blood the Indians dashed forth from their ambush, and five scalps were taken in an instant, while they went on the hunt for two more.

Bronco Billy had also darted forward with the braves, leaving Captain Leonard alone in possession of the camp, and the horses of the assailants were their aim.

Suddenly, as Bronco Billy ran through the scattered timber, two horsemen dashed out of a thicket almost upon him.

He knew they were of the Secret Service band, for he heard one cry:

"Quick, pard, or we'll go under, too."

Instantly he leveled at the nearest and fired, and the man fell from his mustang, while the animal bounded on with the other.

Then came an answering shot, and Bronco Billy was turned half-way round as a bullet plowed through his arm, knocking his revolver from his grasp.

But the flash had shown who it was that fired at him, and as the horseman dashed on, he cried:

"I saw your vile face, Rio Grande Rob, and I'll pay you for this."

A mocking laugh was the response as the Bronco-Breaker, for he it was, he having met the Secret Service Rangers, dashed on beyond pursuit.

Grasping his wounded arm, which was bleeding freely, Bronco Billy hastened to camp, where he found his mother, Lou, and Dove Eye already assembled, and he was welcomed with glad cries by all.

"It was the Bronco-Breaker who shot me, but I'll get even with him," said the plucky boy.

"Let the Dove Eye see," said the Indian girl, and with a surgical skill that was remarkable, she extracted the ball and dressed the wound just as her father and his warriors returned with happy faces, for they had taken six scalps, and had captured six ponies, which was a lucky day's work for the redskins, and over and over again they bade Dove Eye express their gratification to Billy, who remarked:

"A little hair tickles them mightily, and I am glad they are so easily pleased, while we have much to thank them for."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE YOUNG BRONCO-BREAKER.

As I have said, my reader, the destination of the Powells was the ranch of the son and brother, George Powell, who had made his home in Texas, and was living on a ranch of his own, where he had built a comfortable cabin, and gotten around him a number of cattle.

George Powell had left the old farm in New York State to follow the same life of adventure, if in his power, which his eldest brother, Frank Powell, had done, and his daring and indomitable energy had already made him famous from the Lone Star State to Nebraska, where he was known as Prairie Wanderer, and had, a short while before the coming of his mother and brother, won the *sobriquet* he now bears of "Night-Hawk George," or, "Texas Night Hawk."

This name he won by wiping out by a clever plot and daring a band known as the Night Hawks, and whose depredations had made them a terror in the land.

While George Powell, therefore, had won a name in Texas for remarkable pluck and reckless daring, not to speak of being most popular for many noble qualities, and his brother, Doctor Frank Powell, had become famous upon the northern plains as "Fancy Frank," "White Beaver," and "Mighty Medicine," my hero of this true biographical narrative was winning fame for himself while on the way to the land of reckless adventure.

After the annihilation of the Secret Service Rangers, the little party continued on their way with little dread, for Wolf-Killer had insisted upon guiding them to a point from whence it would be easy to reach the ranch of Texas Night Hawk, and Captain Leonard had become so attached, as had also his daughter, to their new-found friends, that they were perfectly willing to make their home in the same locality.

Captain Leonard had been a man of means, whose kindness to others had lost him his fortune, and unwilling to live in poverty among those he had only known in wealth, both himself and daughter had been anxious to seek a home elsewhere, and the captain knew that the few thousands he had saved from the wreck would give him a good start in Texas.

Parting from their red allies and friends, the little party held on their way, and reaching the river kept on down it to the settlement of ranches, and one pleasant evening reached the home of Night-Hawk George, who gave them a royal welcome.

Some days after their arrival Captain Leonard established his ranch and bought his cattle, and the future had a rosy look for all.

But Billy had ridden over to the fort with his brother, and fortunately for himself, arrived just as a herd of ponies had been brought in to be broken for the use of the soldiers, having been caught wild upon the prairies.

Billy laughed at the soldiers that were thrown, and being badgered by one to mount a vicious mustang that no one could master, did so, and won rounds of applause from all, while the commandant said:

"Night-Hawk George, your brother is just the one I want to break mustangs in for my men, and I'll pay him liberally for the work."

It was dangerous work, but Bronco Billy reveled in danger, and at once accepted the offer, and soon after began on his new business.

The soldiers, though admiring the handsome, reckless boy, were many of them anxious to see him thrown, and all kinds of animals were sought for and given the youth to break.

But Billy Powell was a born rider, clung to a horse like a cat, whether he rode with or without a saddle, and seemed able to tire out the worst bucking horse that could be given him, while he seemed tireless.

From breaking mustangs he took to catching them wild on the prairie, greatly preferring that sport, as he called it, to being a cowboy on his brother's ranch, and it was not long before he began to "gather dust," as he called laying up his money, for he sold his catches at a fair price.

His first duty in this line was to seek out and capture a very fine bronco, and, training it, give it to Lou Leonard, a favor that young lady fully appreciated.

With all at the fort, and all of the rancheros for fifty miles around, the youth became a great favorite, and his fame as a bronco-breaker increased daily, while he had another name given him by the wife of the commandant, which he still bears, and deservedly.

That name was "The Saddle King."

CHAPTER XVII.

BILLY STRIKES A VILLAIN'S TRAIL.

ONE of the most important personages among the settlers about the fort was a man by the name of Benson, and whose Christian name being Hugh was known generally as "Major Hugh."

He had never served in the army, but on one occasion had raised a few men and made a raid after the Indians, which was sufficient in Texas to have gained for him the honorary rank of general.

He had money, lived in a tent quarters over in a clump of timber, with a negro man and woman as servants, bought cattle and speculated in them, and some said could play a winning game of cards at all times.

He was a handsome man, hailed originally from Alabama, and had been well educated.

He was a popular man with the lower classes, but few of his equals liked him, and fewer cared to offend him, for he had an ugly temper, and was a most dangerous man in personal combat, as he had proved on several occasions.

The "major" upon seeing Lou Leonard had been struck at first sight, and in the building of his home Captain Leonard found the "speculator" a most useful man.

Lou was also drawn toward him by his fascinations, but Bronco Billy never liked him and told her so.

"What have you against him?" asked Lou Leonard of the youth.

"Oh, nothing, only he reminds me of Rio Grande Rob, and at heart I do not believe that he is any better."

"For shame, Billy, to speak ill of a man who has never wronged you," said Lou.

Billy made no reply, but he determined to keep his eye on Major Hugh Benson and see if he could discover whether he was not right in his suspicions.

Among the other admirers of Lou Leonard at the fort was a handsome young lieutenant with a noble nature stamped upon every feature of his face.

He had won a name for desperate pluck, was rich, courtly in his manners, and beloved by all who knew him.

He had fallen in love at first sight with Lou Leonard, and became a constant visitor at the ranch, until he discovered that Major Hugh was a rival.

It cut him to the heart, and he determined to give her up, for he thought he saw that the major was the favored one in the maiden's eyes.

He was on his way to the ranch, and had halted at seeing Major Benson's horse lariat out before the cabin.

Slowly he turned his horse, without emerging from the timber that skirted the river, and which would have brought him within view of those on the piazza.

"Which way, Lieutenant Lomax?"

Fred Lomax turned quickly to discover Bronco Billy behind him, and mounted upon Mephisto.

"Well, Billy, I was going to the Leonard ranch, but I have changed my mind," he answered, greeting Billy with a shake of the hand, for he greatly liked the handsome, devil-may-care boy, and had been on several mustang hunts with him.

"Oh, I see, the major is there," said Billy, glancing out toward the ranch.

"Yes, Billy."

"Lieutenant Lomax, I believe *Major* Hugh Benson is a rascal."

"What?"

"I believe it."

"That is a strong accusation, Billy."

"I mean it."

"You better keep it from his ears, or he will harm you."

"I intend to tell him so, as soon as I see my way clear."

"Don't be rash, Billy."

"Oh, I won't be, sir; but he loves, or pretends to love, Lou Leonard, and I feared she was getting a little soft on him; but he won't marry her, for I shall soon show her what he is."

"You have some reason for saying what you do, Billy."

"Yes, sir, and I'm on the right trail; but will you do me a good turn if I have to ask it of you, sir?"

"Certainly, anything in my power."

"Well, sir, I have struck the trail of a villain, and I'll soon know the result."

"Now come, sir, and let us go to the Leonard ranch."

The officer hesitated an instant, but then rode on with the youth.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A VISIT TO "SOCIAL CITY."

UPON arriving at the Leonard ranch Lieutenant Lomax and Billy found the major seated upon the piazza with Lou.

They lariat their horses out and took seats, while Lou greeted them in an embarrassed way, and Major Hugh in a by no means cordial manner, which nettled the young officer; but Billy made a sign to him to be calm, and the conversation became general.

Finding that the new-comers were to remain and await the return of Captain Leonard who was away, but would be back in an hour or so, Major Benson arose and took his departure in no very pleasant humor, for it was evident that he had been interrupted in a *tete-a-tete* where love-making played a conspicuous part.

"I'll go a little way with you, major; lieutenant, I'll soon return," said Billy, and a moment after the maiden and the officer were alone.

With the frankness of his nature he at once told her that he loved her; but if she had any feeling for another he would retire from the field in that other's favor.

Lou Leonard was a sensible girl, and for full a minute she looked full in the face of her lover.

He was handsome, winning and true.

About the other, Hugh Benson, there was a mystery she could not fathom, and a *something* she feared.

He had half-way fascinated her, but the honest avowal of the young officer came in time to save her, and instantly she put forward her hand and said:

"Lieutenant Lomax, I have never loved any man."

"I admire you, respect you, and I will try and love you."

"If I do not, in a short time, I will honestly tell you so."

He thanked her, and at once changed the subject, and soon after Billy returned and said slyly:

"I escorted the dear man past the woods; but, lieutenant, you said you would go over to Camp Social with me to-night."

"And I will, Billy, so let us start."

"You surely do not go to that wicked place, Billy?" said Lou, reproachfully.

"Oh, yes! for I'm awfully wicked when I'm found out," was the reply, and soon after the officer and the youth rode away.

Camp Social, or "Social City," as it was also called, was a settlement where were congregated a few hundred log cabins, several stores, blacksmith-shop, school-house—on Sundays a church—and a score of saloons where gambling and carousing were the order of the day and night.

It was some twenty miles from the Leonard ranch, and was known as a den of iniquity far and wide.

Cowboys, soldiers, Mexicans and Indians

were wont to congregate there and be fleeced by the professional blacklegs who made the haunt their home.

It was dark when Lieutenant Lomax rode up to a shanty in the outskirts and knocked.

The door was opened by an old woman, and she at once seemed to recognize Billy, and no wonder, for he had saved her from being run over by some drunken Mexicans a few days before.

"Mrs. Dennis, I want to leave our horses in your husband's stable for a while," said Billy; and permission being readily granted, the two held their way to the so-called hotel, a two-story shanty occupying half an acre of ground, and likely to change its locality with the first hard blow.

Going to the stables, Billy said:

"Do you know that horse, lieutenant?" and he pointed to a large roan.

"Yes; it is one of Major Benson's favorite animals."

"Just so; now let us go over and I'll play a little game of cards."

"Why, Billy!"

"Oh! I'm a good card-player, sir; only I never play for money; but to-night I want you to watch my game, and see if my partner doesn't cheat me."

"Don't say anything if you do see it; only watch closely, sir."

They then went to the "Gold Dust Exchange," which was a gambling den of the worst kind, and which Billy seemed to know, for he was a youth who got acquainted thoroughly with all that was going on in the locality where he lived.

There were over a hundred men present, and *monte*, *roulette*, and private games were in full blast.

There was a motley gang present, and a few soldiers, who shrunk out of sight upon seeing their officer.

Billy led the way to a table where a burly, heavily-bearded man was seated, playing cards with several others.

"Hullo, youngster! you are back again, I see," he said, upon seeing Billy.

"Yes, and I'm flush to-night, so don't mind playing," answered the youth.

"You should have played t'other night, fer I'd have lent you a twenty to start you, and taken your I. O. U. if you lost."

"Thank you, I never borrow; but I'll play to-night."

"Sit down there."

"No, I won't play in a game where more than two are playing, for I get mixed."

"Well, these gents will yield to you, for they haven't got much to lose and they never win."

The rough men at the table yielded their seats, and the bearded fellow said:

"Your officer friend can come in, can't he?"

"No, I never gamble for money," was the reply of Lieutenant Lomax.

The man laughed rudely, and then the game began.

After about two hours Billy arose from the table, saying lightly:

"Well, luck went back on me to-night, for you have won two hundred dollars from me."

"Better luck next time, youngster; good-night," and the bearded gambler turned to another victim, while Billy and Lieutenant Lomax left the saloon, and soon after were on their way out of Social City.

CHAPTER XIX.

BILLY UNMASKS A VILLAIN.

SEVERAL days after the visit of Bronco Billy and the young officer to Social City, a man came into the settlement above the fort, and began to badger different persons for a game of cards.

He was universally successful, and had soon won quite a snug sum, which he handed to a sutler, with the request to give him large notes for it, that he could the more readily carry it.

"You are the same fellow that won my money at Social City," said Billy, stepping between the sutler and the stranger.

"Yes, my boy; do you wish to try another game?" was the rejoinder.

"Yes, but not a game of cards this time."

"Sutler Dade, don't give that man his money until I tell you, for I say he is a blackleg and a swindler."

Bronco Billy was very angry, it seemed from his flashing eyes, and yet his voice was calm, but clear and in earnest.

"Boy! I'll—"

"No, you won't, sir."

The speaker was Billy's brother, Night-Hawk George, a handsome, dashing young ranchero, and he covered the gambler with his revolver in a way that checked his action, which was evidently to punish the youth.

"Two against one! Is this Texas fair play, pards?" called out the stranger.

"No, I am the only one against you, and my brother only intends to keep you quiet while I tell the boys what I know about you," cried Billy, and raising his voice he continued:

"Boys, this man cheated me out of two hundred dollars at Social City the other night."

"That's right, lose your money and then squeal out that you were cheated," sneered the man.

"No, I don't squeal, no matter what luck goes against me; but I saw you cheat there, and I saw you cheat in every game you just played, and one other saw you who will back up my words."

"Is he another boy?"

"No, a man."

"Then let him dare accuse me of cheating," savagely said the gambler.

The little door of the sutler's shanty swung open, and out stepped Lieutenant Fred Lomax, who said, calmly:

"I dare accuse you, sir."

"Then you die—"

"Hold on! you move and you die," cried Night-Hawk George, and he thrust his revolver full in the man's face.

"By Heaven! this is an outrage, to be insulted and not allowed to resent."

"Men, I appeal to you!" and the man turned to the crowd.

But the presence of the lieutenant kept back any soldier that might have cared to side with the gambler, and Billy said:

"Oh! you'll be allowed to resent it, for I am the one you are to settle with."

"Here, sutler, give me that money!"

The sutler glanced at Lieutenant Lomax and obeyed.

Then Billy handed back to each loser all that he had lost, took two hundred dollars out for himself, and returned the remaining roll of bills with the remark:

"If I knew who the balance belonged to I'd give it to them."

The men grasped the bills most eagerly, and then Billy said:

"Men, I suppose you want me to prove my words; and to do so I can only say that this man cheated me, as he did you, and Lieutenant Lomax and myself saw it."

"It is a lie!" and with a quick blow the gambler felled Bronco Billy to the earth.

Night-Hawk George looked for an instant as though he would kill him; but the boy quickly arose, and wiping away the blood from his brow, which was cut by the hard blow, he said:

"You shall answer for this, *Major Hugh Benson!*"

"Major Hugh!"

The exclamation was on a dozen lips, and the man he addressed turned deadly pale.

"Yes, you are Hugh Benson, masking your face under that beard and playing the gambler and thief under it!"

"See here!"

Quick as a flash Billy sprung forward and seized the long beard, and dragging it off, the face of Major Hugh Benson was indeed revealed.

CHAPTER XX.

A DEADLY ENCOUNTER.

To say that all present, excepting Bronco Billy, were astonished at this sudden unmasking of the gambler, would be to draw it very mildly.

They had known Gambler Gray for a long time in those parts, and looked upon him as a successful card-sharp and most mysterious man, as at times he was wont to disappear for weeks at a time, going no one knew where.

Thus the secret came out that Gambler Gray and Major Hugh Benson were one and the same person.

"Pards!" said Bronco Billy, in his off-hand way, "I've been suspecting this fellow for some time, so I took to trailing him, and I found he kept his disguise at widow Dennis's, in Social City, and fitted out there, and I got Lieutenant Lomax to go with me to catch him under his beard in some out-of-the-way locality, and we did it."

"Now, he has struck me, and I'm going to make him fight me."

"I'll not fight a boy!" said Hugh Benson, in sullen tones.

"Oh, a boy can shoot as well as a man; and if you don't fight me I guess the lynch-ers will give you just so long to get out of this."

"If you do fight me, then my brother, Night-Hawk, will see nobody harms you."

"You are armed, so step off twenty paces, and let us lose no time, for my eye is swelling from your love-lick, and I won't be able to see out of it soon."

The man cast an uneasy glance around him, and he saw a desire to hang him in nearly every face, for men were not slow to act thus in Texas against one they knew to be an arrant fraud.

Should he fight Bronco Billy and kill him, it might make it worse for him; but still he would use that as a chance for his safety, and said:

"If I kill you they'll lynch me."

"No, for Night-Hawk George will not permit that if he gives his word," replied Billy.

"But will you give your word?"

"Yes, if the duel is a fair one."

"Do you urge the meeting between your brother and myself?" asked the gambler.

"Certainly; for one of our blood cannot forgive a blow," was the haughty response.

"Well, I'll meet the boy, so name the terms."

"Revolvers, and both to be mounted and stand fifty paces apart."

"At a signal from Lieutenant Lomax, if he will give it, both to advance firing, and six shots allowed."

"If you survive, you shall be given three hours' start of any one who may wish to follow and kill you," said Night-Hawk George Powell in business-like tones.

Lieutenant Lomax consented to give the word, the two adversaries mounted their horses and took their stands, and with revolvers drawn sat ready for the charge.

Hugh Benson was sullen and white, while Billy had the same free-and-easy air and a smile upon his handsome face, in spite of the blow he had received from his enemy's fist.

"I needn't leave any word for mother, Georgie, for if I go under you know all about it," said Billy pluckily to his brother.

"Perhaps you have a request to make, sir, in case of death to you?" said Lieutenant Lomax to Benson, who answered roughly:

"No; there are none to mourn for me, and my fortune is upon me and in my tent, and those who hang me are welcome to it."

"Have you no kindred who would wish to know whether you are dead or alive?" asked the officer.

"No!" was the blunt reply.

"Are you ready?" then called out Lieutenant Lomax in ringing tones.

The man bowed, and Billy shouted back:

"Rough and ready!"

"Charge!"

With the word the two ponies sprung into the air and forward, and at the instant Hugh Benson fired, and his bullet knocked Billy's hat off, while a shot from the boy brought down the mustang ridden by the man.

But the gambler caught on his feet and fired a second shot, which just clipped Billy's shoulder, and got in return a bullet in his left arm.

As his foe was dismounted, Billy sprung to the ground also and turned Mephisto loose, and then at the same instant came the third shot from each revolver, the man's to shatter the knife-hilt in the boy's belt, and his bullet to plow its way along the flesh over the ribs of his foe, and dangerously near his heart.

The shock caused the gambler to drop to his knees, while Billy had been turned half round by the blow of the gambler's bullet against the knife-hilt.

Seeing his enemy half down, Billy, who was as cool as an icicle, withheld his fire for an instant to see how badly hurt the gambler was, and for his clemency nearly lost his life, for a shot from the gambler cut a curl from his temple, just grazing the skin.

Then Billy pulled trigger for his fourth shot, and it passed through the gambler's hat, also grazing the skin.

Hugh Benson then rose to his knees, and Bronco Billy advanced rapidly upon him,

and the two revolvers once more flashed, but one a second in advance of the other.

But that second was enough to send a bullet through the gambler's heart and destroy his aim, though he fired as he fell dead.

A yell broke from the crowd, and in the excitement that followed Bronco Billy mounted his horse, and, accompanied by his brother and Lieutenant Lomax, rode homeward.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BOLD VENTURE.

THE duel between Bronco Billy and Major Hugh Benson created a great deal of excitement in and around the fort, and rancheros from far and wide flocked to the scene, for many who did not know the man in his character as a pretended gentleman knew him as Gambler Gray, and they were anxious, too, to see the brave boy who had added to his fame by his desperate duel.

And desperate it was, as all could swear who had witnessed it, for Billy had shown tremendous nerve in meeting a man who was generally feared, and when he was rendered reckless to desperation by his exposure and danger from the hands of the mob.

The boy had fired coolly, and with an aim that showed he was determined and had perfect control of himself, and his fearful danger and the whirr of his adversary's bullets, did not unnerve him in the slightest degree, as his bearing throughout showed.

He could have killed his foe, all admitted, when he had him twice at disadvantage, but generously allowed him to continue his fire at him, until the affair excited the lookers-on to a fearful extent.

As the duel had occurred under the shadow of the walls of the fort almost, and Bronco Billy was in the service of the commandant as a mustang-breaker, while Lieutenant Lomax was also interested in it, the colonel felt bound to take notice of it, and at once sent a sergeant and two men to the Powell ranch, demanding that the youth should at once return with them.

He did not blame Billy, and was certainly glad that so clever a villain had been so adroitly unmasked by the youth; but his duty forced him to take steps in the matter to have the young Bronco-Breaker tried, for whatever the lawlessness might be outside the fort, in it, and those connected with it, must be held accountable for their actions.

The sergeant, however, came back without Billy, and reported that he had gone to the wild-horse country after a drove of mustangs for the soldiers.

"Smart boy, that, and he'll take good care to remain away until the whole affair has blown over," said the commandant, with a smile, to Lieutenant Lomax, who was present.

And Bronco Billy had been "smart enough," as the colonel termed it, to strike out from home at once, fearing that some little complications might follow that would make it unpleasant for him, and his mother entertained the sergeant and soldiers well, and told them that

her son had gone off for quite a stay, as he had taken a led horse, with camp equipage and provisions.

It had been the desire of Bronco Billy ever since he had heard Rio Grande Rob speak of the black stallion that led the wild herd of horses in the upper prairies to capture that animal.

Since then he had heard many stories regarding the superb beast, some hunters reporting that he was faster even than the white stallion which Billy rode, while some said that when he led the herd in flight from foes, he was wont to drop back to the rear and hasten on the slow animals, and once had attacked a Mexican, who had captured a fine mare, and torn him nearly to pieces with his teeth.

All that had seen the beast described him as a long-bodied, slender-limbed animal, with arched neck, small head, fiery eyes and gleaming white teeth, while his mane and tail were exceedingly long.

He was black as night, proud as Lucifer, and more vicious than had been his white rival, while it was believed he was infinitely fleet.

To capture him had been impossible, though at one time a hundred horsemen were after him, and it had been given up as useless to try.

He was known as the Bronco King, and Billy argued that, as he was the Saddle King, he certainly should be the captor and owner of his Royal Mustang Highness; and it was upon the bold venture of capturing that horse on which he started the very night after his duel with the gambler.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTURING A MUSTANG.

It was with a full heart that Bronco Billy rode away from his home, the ranch which he had learned to love so well, for he was a boy with a noble and tender heart, in spite of his indomitable pluck, and it cut him to the quick to feel that he had killed Hugh Benson, whom he had known so well.

Instinct had taught him to dislike the man from the first, and following that instinct he had sought to ferret out some act of the gambler's that would prevent Lou Leonard from loving him, for he loved her as though she were his own sister.

In that endeavor he had succeeded by trailing the villain to earth, and in the excitement of unmasking him, and stinging under a blow, he had fought him.

But the remembrance of it haunted him disagreeably as he rode away from home that night, when he had hardly given the killing of two of the Secret Service Rangers and Black Buffalo a second thought.

"Ah me! I expect if I lead this wild life long I shall get used to killing," he sighed, as he urged Mephisto into a gallop to drown thought.

Billy was two days reaching the wild-horse country, for, with a pack animal, he traveled slowly, and having come determined to make a stay of it until he caught the Bronco King, he looked about for a good camping-place.

This he found in the mouth of a deep canyon that ran to the bank of a small river.

There was heavy timber to shelter him, good feeding for his horses, crystal water to drink, plenty of wood for his camp-fire, and he selected a spot where it would be hard for a foe to surprise him, and which he could hold against odds if attacked, for he knew that he was in a dangerous country.

With his hatchet he soon cut poles and brush, and erected a shanty, and when night came on, retired to his blanket bed as comfortable as a bug in a rug, his only companions near, his two horses and a large hound his brother had given him, and which he had brought along "as housekeeper" he had said.

Bright and early, and after a night of undisturbed rest, Billy was up in the morning, and soon got breakfast, and was ready for work.

First, he took a reconnoissance on foot, and discovered to his delight that he was in the very heart of the wild-horse country, and many could be seen feeding far off on the prairie, and black ones, too, but not *the* black one of his hopes.

Going back to his camp, he saddled Mephisto, and stripping him of all unnecessary equipments, left the pack-horse and dog in charge, and started forth for a hunt after the Bronco King.

Mephisto, once a king himself of a herd, now wholly mastered by human kind, had proven himself a most valuable horse-catcher, and Billy's success in capturing so many superior mustangs for the fort had been greatly owing to the speed of the splendid animal he rode.

A sweeping gallop over the prairie, and he saw a sorrel mare that was worthy of his lariat, and he gave the word to Mephisto, who at once bounded away in pursuit.

A run of a short half-mile, and the fleet stallion was within range of the rope which Billy was whirling, ready to throw.

A few good turns and the lasso was sent whizzing through the air like a rocket, the noose settled over the upraised head of the flying and frightened victim, and at once Mephisto dropped back on his haunches, the twang came as the rope tightened, and the imprisoned mustang was thrown heavily to the ground.

In an instant Billy was upon his feet, and rushing toward the prostrate animal, while Mephisto, lying back on his haunches, still held the lariat taut, and stretching from the saddle-horn on his back to the neck of the fallen beast.

In his hand Billy carried a bridle he had made for breaking wild horses in, and it was slipped over the head of the half-stunned, half-choked animal, while a word to Mephisto released the strain, and in an instant the mustang rallied, and was upon her feet.

But Billy was upon her back, the rein in hand, and away over the prairie dashed the maddened, fright-frenzied animal, while Mephisto came after at a gait that held him just behind.

A hot race of a mile, and then the youth drew in his rein, and put his new capture "through her paces," which resulted in taming her considerably, after a struggle of an hour.

Back to camp Billy then rode the animal, delighted with his first day's capture, and at once set to work to make a corral in which to

keep his captures, for he felt that he was going to be most successful, as nearly every horse he had seen in the herd had been worthy of capture.

The next day Bronco Billy again sallied forth for a hunt, and when the sun had set four more fine mustangs were added to his list, but nowhere had he yet come upon the black stallion.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TWO "KINGS."

SOME weeks passed away, and Bronco Billy was the happy owner of half a hundred specimens of horseflesh that would have charmed any eye.

But the black Bronco King was not among them.

He had all of his lariats in use, and knew that he had made by far the best capture of his life, and could return to the fort with renewed honor, but he wished to make his return a triumph that would cause the colonel to overlook his duel under the shadow of the flag, and this he thought could only be done by carrying back the black bronco, or by giving information of an Indian raid, or taking in with him a few scalps.

Of the Indians he knew nothing, for he had not seen a red-skin during his stay in the wild-horse country.

And of course, if he saw no red-skins he could give no information regarding their movements or take their scalps.

Under ordinary circumstances he would gladly have returned, but he dreaded trouble, and yet he might have faced that had he not the very day before seen the black Bronco King!

He had given Mephisto a number of hard runs that day, and just as he was returning home with his last capture, and his faithful horse was going along at a tired gait he seldom showed, out of a clump of timber had dashed an animal the sight of which had brought a shout of joy to the lips of the boy.

There was no mistaking that superb beast he beheld before him, with a hundred others at his back.

The ink-black, glossy hide, the head held high, the wide-extended nostrils, the glaring eyes, gazing at him as he stood there like a statue, not a hundred yards away, while he had sent, by a sign they well understood, his herd off at a run across the prairie.

Quickly did Billy settle himself into his saddle, grasp his lasso and give the word to Mephisto to go.

And right nobly the white stallion sprung away, for he seemed to recognize his rival of a year before.

For a moment the black bronco stood, as though he intended to meet both horse and rider, and then, with a vicious neigh, he wheeled and darted away like the wind.

"Now, black, I'll test your boasted speed!" cried Bronco Billy, roweling Mephisto with the spur.

And all too soon to please the young horse-hunter it was tested, for Mephisto, tired out, was by no means a match for the Bronco King, though he could have run down any other horse of the herd.

This Billy soon realized, and he had the humanity not to press the white, and wheeling, started back for camp.

But he was happy, for the Bronco King was not a myth, had not been captured, and was still at large upon the prairies, and in the vicinity. Billy felt a strong hope of his capture, for he said:

"He out-hoofed you well to-day, Mephisto; but I'll give you a couple of days' rest, and then we'll see if the Bronco King don't lower his proud head to the Saddle King."

CHAPTER XXIV.

STRATEGY.

FOR several days Mephisto was allowed to have perfect rest, and Bronco Billy groomed him as though he were a thoroughbred racer, in the mean time riding other horses of his herd when he went out to reconnoiter for the black stallion.

By watching him closely, and his habits, Bronco Billy saw that the black every afternoon collected his bands into one large herd, and led them about fifteen miles to the river, where they fed during the night on the grass on the banks.

He also observed that they went a certain trail, and at an easy gallop, skirting two pieces of timber about six miles apart.

This knowledge decided him upon his course of action, for he at once laid his plans for work.

Two of his fleetest animals, next to the white stallion, were to be used and ridden bareback, and Mephisto was to be used for the climax.

He picked his horses the day he decided to act, and left camp about noon.

Mephisto was ready saddled and bridled, but he did not ride him, but bestrode one of the other horses, leading the white stallion and third horse.

Arriving at the first clump of timber, Mephisto was hitched therein, all ready to be mounted, his lasso hanging at the saddle-horn, and nothing else of weight being carried to retard his speed.

Placing the white in a dense thicket, not a hundred yards from where the herd of wild horses would pass, and where he would be wholly concealed from view, Bronco Billy mounted one of the two horses, and leading the other, rode on to the second timber motte, some six miles away.

Here he concealed another horse, tying him most securely, and muzzling and blindfolding him so as he could not neigh when his companions dashed by, or even see them when they went near him.

The third horse Billy then rode on slowly to aid him in carrying out his strategical plans for the capture of the black.

A ride of some seven miles brought him to the timber where he had watched the movements of the wild herd on several previous days.

He had a good view of the prairie beyond for miles, and his horse had barely time for rest, when he spied the swaying mass approaching him.

There were over a thousand, and at their head was the splendid Bronco King, leading his subjects right royally.

They were a mile distant, and coming on at a swinging gallop that would carry them to the river in about two hours.

The pounding of their hoofs sounded like distant thunder, a dusty cloud floated above them, and it was a thrilling, strange sight to see these hundreds of fiery steeds, whose mouths were unknown to the bits, and backs that had never been pressed by a saddle, coming on in all their wild freedom.

But Bronco Billy had laid his plans of strategic action, and he had the nerve to carry them out, so stood by his impatient horse, only a short while out of that herd, as cool and plucky as though there was no danger ahead of him.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE HUMAN AND THE BRUTE "KINGS" MEET.

LEADING his herd with all the grandeur of an equine monarch, the Bronco King came on, shying off from the timber a couple of hundred yards, as though he knew danger lurked there for him.

Once he had passed, and Bronco Billy nerved himself for action.

Untying his horse, he threw himself upon his bare back, and darted out of the timber like an arrow from a bow.

A yell told the black horse that a foe was upon them, and he turned his proud head and almost hesitated, as though to show fight.

But Billy rattled off into the air half a dozen shots from his revolver, and on swept the frightened herd, their gallop increased to a run.

And hot in chase went Billy, urging them by yells and shots, for he had brought a number of extra cartridges, and loaded and fired as he rode.

At a breakneck speed for most of the herd, but a long, swinging gallop for the splendid black, the wild brutes kept on their way, following their leader along the trail to the river.

One by one the tired ones fell back and were passed by Billy, and when the six miles were gone over to the second timber, half of the herd was behind him and half in front.

Dashing into the thicket, Billy sprang from the back of his panting steed, fastened him quickly, and in an instant the blind, muzzle, and rope was cut off the other animal, and away went the daring youth in pursuit.

The herd had gained on him considerably; but his fleet horse soon sent the slow ones behind by the score, and ere three miles had been run, three-fourths of the mustangs were in his rear.

On for the river held the black stallion, and close upon his heels came a couple of hundred of the good runners of the herd, pressed hard, though their king yet held high his head, and it was evident had not been driven to show his magnificent speed.

Then in sight came the timber motte in which was Bronco Billy's favorite, the almost matchless Mephisto, whose only rival was then near at hand.

The Bronco King swerved wide of this timber, and when he dashed by only a hundred of his herd were at his heels, and the youth saw that they were feeling the killing pace he had driven them to.

With another volley from his revolver, and a few terrific yells, he kept them on at a better speed, and then obliques for the timber.

Into it he dashed, to find Mephisto nervous and anxious, for well he knew the thunder of his comrades' hoofs, and their frightened neighs and snorts, above which rose the ringing call of his black rival.

In spite of his haste, Bronco Billy coolly looked to his girths, his bridle and his stirrups, though he had arranged all before.

Then his belt of extra arms was cast aside, and upon the back of his splendid steed he sprang.

Out from the timber he went like a rocket in chase, and with a pale, determined face, for defeat or victory now lay before him.

Seeing their pursuer disappear the tired herd had quickly dropped their rapid pace, while others which Billy had left behind had come up.

But beholding him once more in chase, they again rushed forward, the black stallion still leading.

It was now a five, or six mile run over the prairie to the river, and once the Bronco King reached the shelter of the timber there, Billy knew it would be impossible to capture him.

Some days before he had easily out-hoofed Mephisto; but the latter was tired then.

Now the black had just had a swinging race of a dozen miles, and Mephisto was fresh, so that the youth felt high hopes.

The other two horses which he had ridden were swift he knew, but the moment Mephisto settled down to work he saw the difference in speed between them.

Quickly behind him Mephisto sent one after the other of those who still hung at the heels of their equine king, and soon only a score were in advance.

One by one these were come up with and dropped, and then the black realized his danger.

He swerved to the right, as though to run back and regain his herd, but Billy obliques quickly, and he kept on, and alone, for the others had all been passed.

"Now, Mephisto, press him!"

The rider spoke between his teeth, and the horse seemed to fully understand what was meant for him to do.

Driven to show his great speed, the black lengthened himself out to his work and fairly flew over the prairie.

For awhile Billy believed he was going to drop Mephisto, tired as he was, but soon the white's pace began to tell, he warmed to his work, and inch by inch crept up.

It was slow and terrible toil, but the black's run had told on him, or Billy knew he could have outrun the white.

"He is faster and has more bottom than Mephisto even, all things being equal," he muttered, and then he let the white feel the spurs.

On, on they flew like the wind, the black white with foam and the white grown iron-gray with the sweat that poured from him.

Nearer and nearer bounded the white, his rider, lasso in hand, ready for the fatal throw when the right distance was reached.

And promptly the time came, the coil was thrown, whizzed through the air and settled over the haughty head of the black.

Most skillfully aimed, it went true, the coil tightened, Mephisto threw himself back on his haunches, the shock came, the lasso broke, and both horses went down, the white crushing Bronco Billy beneath him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNFORTUNATE MEETING.

At the moment that Bronco Billy threw his lariat over the head of the Bronco King he was so taken up with the work before him he failed to see a horseman dash out of a thicket near by and ride toward him at full speed.

It was a man well armed, well mounted, and with lariat in hand.

As the lasso parted, which sent Mephisto upon his back, with his rider beneath him, and jerked the black flat on his side, the horseman dashed up and threw his lariat just as the Bronco King sprung to his feet, and a second time the magnificent animal was brought down.

At his triumph the man gave a yell of joy, and before the horse could get up, had sprung to the ground and securely entangled his feet, so that it was impossible for him to rise.

Like an insnared tiger he glared upon his captor, who, seeing that the coils were so arranged as not to hurt him, turned his attention to the youth.

"He are only stunned by ther breath bein' knocked out o' him, as I thought.

"No, no, he hain't one ter die easy.

"Waal, I thanks him fer gittin' fer me what I c'u'd never hev capter'd myself; but all ther same he are my inemy an' I hes ter do my duty accordin'."

Thus said the speaker as he stood near the prostrate boy, holding Mephisto by the rein, for the animal was unhurt by his fall, and had scrambled to his feet, and was standing by in apparent silent humiliation.

After a few long-drawn breaths Billy opened his eyes and gave a start.

Then he closed them, rubbed them, and sprung to his feet, crying:

"I dreamt I was dead and the devil had me, and I see it was a true dream."

"Yes, I has got you," was the quiet reply.

"And my horse, too?"

"Yes, both o' 'em."

"Well, what are you going to do with us?"

"Is you hurt?"

"No, I only had the breath knocked out of me."

"So I thought; but what does you think I oughter do with yer?"

"Turn me loose," was the abrupt answer.

"Nary time, fer yer is too dangersome ter go free."

"Well, do your worst, you will find me ready to meet it," and Billy dropped his hand quickly to where he was accustomed to have it meet his pistol butt.

The man laughed rudely and said:

"I hes 'tended ter thet, boy, fer here are ther weepins, even ter ther one in yer bootleg, with which yer tuk me in onst."

"You are sharper than you were that time, Rio Grande Rob."

"Yas, I hes l'arnt by exper'ence; but come, sonny, I intends ter tie yer an' tote yer off ter ther Injun kentry ter be scalped."

Resistance was useless, and that Bronco Billy well knew, and he submitted quietly while the ruffian bound him securely.

"I hes been watchin' yer, boy, fer some days, an' I see yer well-laid plan ter capter thet ani-mile, so I'll jist fetch in yer other two horses from ther timber, an' we'll go ter yer camp over yonder, arter which we will set off fer ther Injun willage."

"Then I comes back ter take in yer corral o' wild horses, an' they'll fetch me a big price."

"Oh! but yer hes been kind ter ther old man, sonny."

Bronco Billy made no reply; but though his hopes had suddenly had such a downfall he did not despair.

Making him mount the white stallion, and hopping the animal so he could not run, Rio Grande Rob then untied the black, and sprung upon his back as he bounded to his feet.

It was a fierce fight between man and beast, but whatever the faults of the Bronco-Breaker, he was a man of nerve and a superb horseman, and in the end he triumphed.

Then the two other horses were taken in, and Rio Grande Rob and his prisoner set off for the camp of the latter.

"Waal, yer is well located here, sonny, an' fixt up same as ef yer home were ter be right heur fer life."

"But I hes come in on yer, an' at daybreak we starts fer ther willage o' ther red-skins. Why, I intends ter make yer a present ter ther chief."

"Then, as I tole yer, I returns here ter rope in yer cattle, an' sell 'em in ther settlements."

"Git what sleep yer kin, sonny, fer yer'll need it ter refresh yer when ther reds git hold of yer."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A GLAD RECOGNITION.

THE Indian guard of a Comanche village in the hills was surprised, the evening after the double capture of the Saddle King and the Bronco King, to see two horsemen approaching his position.

That they were pale-faces he saw at a glance.

One was a large, cruel-faced man, mounted upon a superb black stallion, and the other was a handsome, almost girlish-faced youth, riding a splendid white stallion.

The man was free, the boy was bound securely to his saddle, and the lariat of his horse was held by his captor.

It is needless to say that they were Rio Grande Rob and Bronco Billy, mounted upon the two equine kings of the herd of wild horses, now thoroughly under the control of their masters.

The Indian seemed to recognize the man, for he advanced to meet him, at the same time

glancing with admiration upon the two stallions, which he seemed also to know.

"How, pale-face Horse Chief?" he asked, in broken English.

"Well, red-skin, well, thankee. In fact, I c'udn't be in more primer health, seein' as how ther hull univarse jist now wags ter suit me."

"Pale-face Horse Chief come ter live with Comanche now?" asked the Indian.

"Not adzactly, but I may hev ter some day, as a leetle diffikilty I got inter two weeks ago in ther settlements hes raised a row that makes my head wuth jist one thousan' dollars in dust.

"But I hes a present heur fer yer chief, red-skin."

"Chief at village."

"Jist whar I 'spected ter find him, onless he war off on some ha'r-gath'rin' shindig," and Rio Grande Rob, as though fully acquainted with the advance to the Indian camp, rode on with his young prisoner, who was pale but calm, and by no means hopeless.

A ride of a couple of miles further up into the hills, and they were joined by several Indian warriors, who escorted them to the village, which was situated in a most inaccessible position.

Straight to the *tepee* of the chief went the two whites, accompanied by the constantly-increasing crowd of Indians, and at last they drew rein before the chief of the tribe, who had come out of his wigwam upon seeing their approach.

One glance at the chief and the one who stood by his side, and the face of Bronco Billy flushed with hope, for they were none other than *Wolf-Killer* and *Dove Eye*.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

"How is yer, pard chief?" called out Rio Grande Rob as he approached the *tepee*, and *Wolf-Killer* nodded, for he did not speak English.

Remembering this fact, the Bronco-Breaker in bad Comanche continued:

"Yer see I am the brother of the great *Wolf-Killer*, if I have a pale face, for I have brought him a young brave he can burn, cut up, or do anything he has a mind to with."

"Where is he?" asked the chief.

"Here."

"That young brave is the friend of *Wolf-Killer*," was the dignified reply.

"No; the *Wolf-Killer* would not have such a friend," said Rio Grande Rob.

"Yes, he is my pale-face son; he saved the *Dove Eye*, my daughter, from the Apache chief, *Black Buffalo*, and the *Wolf-Killer* and his people love him.

"Let him go free, for what has he done that the pale-face Horse Chief should bind him?"

Rio Grande Rob was wholly taken aback by the turn affairs were taking, and muttered to himself:

"I guess I hes brought my goods to the wrong market."

But aloud he said:

"He is a young snake, and he deserves death."

"He stole from me my horses, and tried to kill me."

Dove Eye laughed at this, and her father smiled, while the latter remarked:

"The Horse Chief talks crooked.

"Let the Little Chief talk."

Instantly *Dove Eye* stepped forward and severed the bonds that bound Bronco Billy, and he answered, while Rio Grande Rob scowled savagely:

"Tell your father, *Dove Eye*, that this fellow lies.

"He came to my camp to sell a horse, and I wanted this white one, and he bet me that I could not ride him.

"I staked my money and won him, saddle, bridle and the gold badge he wears on his hat, and which, you remember, you and your father saw on mine.

"I am employed at the fort to catch wild horses for the Government, and I have, a day's journey from here, half a hundred splendid animals in my *corral*.

"This black stallion your warriors doubtless know, and I had lassoed him; but my rope broke, my horse fell on me, and this man ran in and caught the bronco, and made me his prisoner, saying that he would bring me to your father as a present, and when I had been killed and scalped he would go back to my camp, get my horses, and sell them.

"This is the truth, as I can prove if your father and twenty warriors will return to my camp, and I will give them each a bronco superior to any in the tribe, for I have roped only the very best in the herd."

Bronco Billy spoke earnestly, but even the Indians, who did not understand his words, could judge that he was telling the truth.

Dove Eye interpreted to her father all that he had said, and the old chief replied, addressing Rio Grande Rob:

"Horse Chief, you have two faces and two tongues.

"The Little Chief has one face and one tongue for friend and foe.

"He talks straight.

"You brought him here to have me kill him, but he shall see you die."

The wild look that came over the man's face told Bronco Billy that some decision against his enemy had caused his paleness, and he asked quickly:

"*Dove Eye*, what said the chief?"

Dove Eye told him, and instantly Billy replied:

"No, no! do not let them kill him!

"He wronged me, and I will give him a chance for his life if he will fight me."

This tickled old *Wolf-Killer* and his warriors immensely, for a fight between pale-faces was just the style of entertainment they would go miles to witness, and the chief answered:

"The little warrior speaks like a great chief.

"The Horse Chief shall meet him as he says.

"Let them prepare for the fight."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DUEL WITH LARIATS.

"How would the little warrior fight his foe?" asked Dove Eye of Bronco Billy.

"He boasts of being the greatest rider and lasso-thrower on the prairies, so let us meet on the plains with our lariats, and mounted."

This idea set the Indians wild with joy, for never before had they witnessed such a novel battle.

At this proposition of Bronco Billy, Rio Grande Rob laughed rudely, and answered:

"It suits me, for my lasso breakin' yer neck will save it from the hangman."

"But what are ter be did with me then by these durned Injuns?"

"I will ask the chief to let you go free," was the boy's generous response.

"Will he do it?"

Bronco Billy turned to Dove Eye, and through her made the request.

Wolf-Killer made promise, and then, in the joy of his heart at the pleasure before him in seeing the fight, told Bronco Billy he had three soldiers and a scout prisoners in his village, and if he, Billy, was victorious, and asked it, he would let the pale-faces go free with him.

"Indeed I do ask it, and I'd kill that wretch a dozen times to save them," answered the youth.

The preliminaries were then arranged by Billy, he intending to ride Mephisto, and Rio Grande Rob to mount the black stallion.

They were to stand four hundred yards apart, and charge toward each other.

Each was to be armed with a lariat only, and they were to meet at a point between Wolf-Killer and Dove Eye upon one side, and one of the soldiers and the scout, who were prisoners, upon the other, while in the background behind each of the combatants were to stand the mass of Indians as lookers-on.

These terms being arranged, the whole village turned out and moved toward the plain chosen for the meeting, and which was a couple of miles distant.

True to his word, Wolf-Killer set the three soldiers and the scout free, and Bronco Billy recognized them as men who had been captured in a fight Lieutenant Fred Lomax had had with the Apaches some months before, and who were supposed to have been killed, and Dove Eye told him her father had defeated the Apaches, and taken from them their prisoners.

The poor men were delighted to have the tide thus turn in their favor, and the scout and one of the soldiers, a sergeant, were chosen referees, as it were, with Wolf Killer and Dove Eye.

Arriving at the prairie, or level plateau in the hills, the Indian villagers, warriors, squaws and children, divided themselves into two divisions, and took their stands about four hundred yards apart. Before one of these bodies sat Rio Grande Rob on the black stallion, and in front of the other was Bronco Billy, on Mephisto.

Both were stripped for the fray, and held their lassoes coiled in hand.

In the center of the open space stood Wolf-Killer and Dove Eye upon one side, and some

fifty paces away the scout and the sergeant, and it was between these four that the combatants were to meet.

When ready, both combatants were to whirl their lassoes around their heads as a signal, and then Wolf-Killer was to give the signal to start by firing a revolver, one of a pair which Bronco Billy had given him after his rescue of Dove Eye.

Rio Grande Rob wore a confident smile, for he knew that his boast was a just one, that he could throw the lariat as true as he could send a bullet from a revolver, while Bronco Billy wore the same devil-may-care air he always had in moments of great danger.

When ready, both whirled their lassoes about their heads, and at about the same time, and instantly followed the shot fired by Wolf-Killer.

Into the air and forward bounded both beautiful animals, and upright in their saddles, watchful, determined, sat their riders.

Like the very wind the animals rushed forward, and a silence like death fell upon the crowd of Indians, only the quick hoof-falls breaking the stillness.

On! on! on! until only fifty feet divided the combatants from each other, and yet neither hand moved to throw the fatal noose.

One bound nearer of each horse, and Rio Grande Rob's coil was thrown.

But as it left his hand the white stallion was seen to bound sideways under a sudden pressure, and as the noose circled above the very spot he would otherwise have been, Bronco Billy cast his lariat, and although his foe dodged all in his power it settled around his neck, and wheeling as on a pivot Mephisto bounded back on the course he had come, and the doomed man was torn from his saddle and jerked half a dozen paces at the end of the rope, when reining his horse to a sudden halt, the youth turned and gazed back at the prostrate, motionless form of his foe.

"Glory, Hail Columby! Bronco Billy hes roped him," yelled the liberated scout in stentorian tones, at the moment he saw the noose tighten around the neck of Rio Grande Rob, but his words were drowned in the wild yells of the Indians rushing to the spot, while old Wolf-Killer himself shrieked like mad at the victory of Little Warrior, as he called Billy.

Upon reaching the body of Rio Grande Rob it was found that he was dead, and Dove Eye herself took the gold badge from his broad sombrero and replaced it in Billy's hat, after which a warrior present as skillfully removed the scalp, greatly to the youth's horror and disgust, and back to the Indian village went all, for Wolf-Killer insisted that the young Bronco-Breaker, and the liberated prisoners should return and pass the night with him, promising in the morning to accompany him to his camp and receive his present of twenty-five horses, for the old chief had an eye to business as well as pleasure.

CONCLUSION.

A few words more, kind reader, and I shall have ended my biographical narrative of Billy Powell's youthful days, for my pen does not now follow him to manhood and through his career of after years upon the border.

True to his promise, he gave old Wolf-Killer and Dove Eye, who also accompanied him to his camp, several of his best captures, and one to each warrior who formed the party, so that, after bidding farewell to his red friends, he had but a score left to continue on to the fort with.

But he was more than repaid for his loss in horseflesh by still having Mephisto and Black King, as he named the black stallion, and better still, the scout and three soldiers.

Arriving at the fort, the welcome he received showed that he need not expect much trouble on account of his duel with Hugh Benson, and upon hearing of his adventures, and knowing that he had saved four prisoners from torture, the colonel forgave him the past without a word, and received for his generosity Mephisto as a present, for the youth knew it was a great stretch of military discipline to overlook his act altogether.

Shortly after his return, Billy acted as "best man" to Lieutenant Lomax, who married Lou Leonard, and some months following, the Powell boys and their mother started for the northern plains to visit White Beaver in his Nebraska home.

And thus drops the curtain upon the adventurous boyhood of Bronco Billy, the Saddle Prince.

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